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COMING UP FOR AIR

上来透口气

说到底，你又能躲避得了？它就在你呼吸的空气里。

George Orwell

〔英国〕乔治·奥威尔 著 孙仲旭 译

 译林出版社

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上来透口气

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目录

版权信息

第一部

第二部

第三部

第四部

Part I

Part II

Part III

Part IV

“他已经死了，但还是不肯躺下。”

——流行歌

第一部

—

真正说起来，那个念头是我在拿到新假牙的当天想到的。

那天早上的事我记得很清楚。七点四十五左右，我悄悄下床，刚好赶在孩子们前头进浴室，还锁上了门。那是个要命的一月早晨，天空是脏的，有点儿黄灰色。从浴室的小方格窗户往下看，能看到一块十码长、五码宽的草坪，围着它的是女贞树篱，中间有块不长草的空地，那就是我们所称的后院。艾里斯米尔路上每家房后都有同样的后院，同样的树篱，同样的草坪，除了一点——哪家没有小孩，哪家的草坪中间就没有空地。

往浴缸里放水时，我用一把有点儿钝的剃刀刮胡子，照在镜子里的那张脸也看着我。往下，洗脸盆上方的小架子上，盛在平底酒杯里的，是属于那张脸的假牙，是我的牙医华纳先生给我暂时用的，直到新假牙做好。我的脸从来没那么难看过，真的，就是那种配黄油色头发和浅蓝色眼睛的砖红色脸。感谢上帝，我的头发没有变灰白也没掉光。等我戴上假牙后，大概会显得比实际年龄年轻些，我可是四十五岁的人了。

得记着去买刀片，我这样想着进了浴缸开始打肥皂。我往胳膊上打了肥皂（我的胳膊属于又短又粗的那种，从手到肘部都有些斑点），然后拿刷背用的刷子给肩胛骨那里也打上肥皂，不借助什么东西我是摸不到那里的。这有点儿烦，不过我身上的确有几个地方现在用手是摸不到了。事实上，我的身材现在略微显胖，但不是像在集贸市场上表演节目的那种胖子。我的体重也就是十四英石¹多一点儿，上次量腰宽时，不是四十八就是四十九英寸，我忘了是哪个数。可我的胖，不属于人们所说的“叫人反胃”的那种，我也没长了个滴溜溜垂

到膝盖的大肚子，原因不过是我有些横向发展，有点儿像桶形。你不认识那种胖子？他们活跃又健壮，像运动员一样蹦蹦跳跳，外号叫“胖子”或“胖哥”，总是聚会时的生气和灵魂之所在。我就是那种人。“胖子”，他们几乎总会这样叫我。胖子保灵，而乔治·保灵是我的真名。

但是那会儿，我没有作为聚会时的生气和灵魂的感觉。我突然想到近来一大早总感到郁闷，尽管我睡得很好，胃口也不错。当然，我知道是怎么回事——就是那副操蛋的假牙。它盛在平底酒杯里，样子给放大了一些，好像是骷髅的牙齿，正对着我咧嘴而笑。套上牙龈后，它能给你一种很糟糕的感觉，挤压着使不上劲的感觉，就像啃了口酸苹果。再者，随你怎么说，假牙是个里程碑。等你掉完最后一颗牙，你调侃自己是个好莱坞帅哥的日子，一点儿没错，算是过到了头。我四十五岁，也长上了膘。站立着往大腿根打肥皂时，我看了一眼自己的体形。胖人要是看不到自己的脚可就糟糕透顶，事实上站直身子时，我只能看到自己脚的前半部。往肚子上打肥皂时我心想，没有哪个女的会多看我一眼，除非给她钱，否则不会看我第二眼，不过那会儿，我也不是很想让哪个女的多看我一眼。

可是我又突然想到，按说那天早晨我有理由情绪稍好一些。首先我不用上班，那天，平时在我的管区用来“代步”的老爷车（我得告诉你我干的是保险这行，在飞火蛇公司，人寿、火灾、盗窃、孪生胎2、船舶失事——无所不保）正在大修。虽然我还得去位于伦敦的办公室看一眼，送去几份文件，不过那天肯定是不用工作了，我要去取新假牙。另外，那些天我脑子里时不时在琢磨一件事，那就是我有十七镑，谁也不知道——我是说家里没人知道。事情是这样的：我们公司有个叫梅乐斯的家伙弄到一本书，名叫《赛马实用占星术》，里面论证了赛马的结果全由各行星对骑手所穿衣服颜色的影响决定。时不时参加赛马的，有匹名叫“科塞尔新娘”的母马，从来都是无缘前几名，不过它的骑师穿的是绿色衣服，刚好跟一颗正在上升的行星的代表色相同。梅乐斯对占星术五迷三道，他在这匹马上投了几镑的注，还死皮赖脸非要我也在它身上下注。到最后完全是为了堵住他的嘴巴，我才下了十便士的注，但是我的一贯原则是不赌博。果不其

然，“科塞尔新娘”轻而易举跑了第一。我忘了准确的赔率是多少，但是我那注赢了十七镑。好像是灵机一动——非常古怪，大概又代表了我这辈子的另一个里程碑——我只是把十七镑悄悄存进银行，谁也没告诉，以前我可从来没干过这种事。如果我是个好丈夫和好爸爸，就会拿这笔钱给希尔达（我老婆）买套衣服，再给孩子们买双靴子。可是我当好丈夫和好爸爸已经当了十五年，开始觉得当够了。

全身打完肥皂后，我感觉好了些，躺在浴缸里，还在想着那十七镑钱，想着怎样花掉。在我看来，供选择的方案有两种：一是找女人过个周末，二是一点点悄悄花掉，买些零七杂八的东西，比如雪茄和双份威士忌。我刚开始又放些热水，脑子里想着女人和雪茄时，外面传来一阵嘈杂的声音，像是一群野牛跑下通往浴室的两级台阶。不用说，那是孩子，像我们这种房子里有两个小孩，就像往能盛一品脱的杯子里装一夸脱³啤酒。外面有一阵乱跺脚的声音，然后是一声痛苦的喊叫：

“爸爸！我要进来！”

“嗨，不行。走开！”

“可是爸爸！我得找个地方！”

“那就去别的地方吧。走开，我在洗澡。”

“爸——爸！我要找个地——方！”

没用！我知道那是个危险信号。厕所在浴室里——我们这种房子里，不在这里又能在哪里。我拔掉浴缸的塞子，赶紧把自己抹了个半干。门一打开，小比利——我的小儿子，七岁大——箭一般冲过我身旁，也避开我对准他脑袋抡的一巴掌。直到衣服快穿好在找领带时，我才发现我的脖子上还有点儿肥皂。

脖子上有肥皂真是件很糟糕的事，它给人一种让人恶心的黏糊糊的感觉，而且离奇的是，不论你怎样仔细用海绵抹干净，一旦发现脖子上有肥皂，余下的一天时间里，你都会感觉黏糊糊的。我下了楼，

脾气不好，准备要找别人的碴。

我们家吃饭的地方跟艾里斯米尔路上别人家的一样狭窄，长十四英尺，宽十二英尺。里面放了个日本橡木餐具柜、两个空的盛水瓶和希尔达她妈当作结婚礼物送给我们的银鸡蛋架，剩下的地方就没多少了。希尔达面前放着茶壶，脸色阴沉，正处于她一贯的一惊一乍、垂头丧气的状态，只因为《新闻报》上公布了黄油要涨价之类的消息。她没点煤气暖炉，虽然那会儿窗户都关着，却还是冷得要命。我弯腰拿火柴去点火，鼻子里出气很粗（弯腰总让我呼哧呼哧的），像是在向希尔达暗示不满。她斜着眼睛瞟了我一眼，每当她觉得我在奢侈浪费时，总会那样看我。

希尔达今年三十九岁，我刚认识她时，她看上去活像一只兔子。现在还像，只是变得很瘦，还很干瘪，眼里永远是郁郁沉思、忧虑重重的样子。如果不开心超过了一般程度，她有个小把戏，就是耸起肩膀，手臂抱在胸前，像个烤火的吉卜赛女人。有些人在生活中的主要乐趣，就是预见生活中的大灾大难，她就属于那种人。当然，她所预见的灾害，不过是些鸡毛蒜皮的小事，至于战争、地震、瘟疫、饥荒和革命等等，她一概不关心。黄油又要涨价，煤气费账单数字吓人，孩子们的靴子穿旧了，又有一期该付的收音机分期付款——这都是希尔达嘴边的话。到最后我算看出来，她手臂抱在胸前晃动着对我阴沉沉地说话，绝对成了她的赏心乐事。“可是乔治呀，这很严重！我都不知道我们该咋办了！不知道钱从哪儿来！你好像没意识到这有多严重！”翻来覆去说的就是这些。她脑子里有个根深蒂固的想法，那就是我们终将沦落到济贫院。但说来有趣的是，万一有一天我们真的进了济贫院，希尔达的在乎程度倒会远不及我，事实上，她大概还会觉得有了安全感挺不错呢。

孩子们已经在楼下，他们以闪电般的速度洗漱穿衣停当。他们总是那样，这个时辰谁也别想独占浴室。我坐到早餐桌前时，他们正在斗嘴，说的无非是“没错，是你！”“没，我没有！”“没错，是你！”“没，我没有！”那种话，而且看来要斗上整个上午，直到我让他们打住。我们家只有两个小孩，七岁的比利和十一岁的劳拉。我对孩

子的感觉很不寻常，很多时候看到他们我就烦。他们正处于令人厌烦的自以为重要的年龄，这时候的小孩，脑子里想的全是诸如尺子、铅笔盒和谁谁法语得了最高分之类的事。别的时候，特别在他们睡着后，我有种很不一样的感觉。有时候夏天晚上有光亮时，我站在他们的小床边看他们睡觉，看着他们的圆脸蛋和颜色比我的还要淡上几分的亚麻色头发，我心里有了种像《圣经》里所说的翻江倒海的感觉。这种时候，我觉得我像个一点儿用都没了的空种子囊，而我唯一的重要之处，是将这两个活人带入人世并把他们养大。但这只是偶尔的感觉，多数时候，我觉得像我这样活在人世，对自个儿来说还是挺重要的，我觉着我这把老骨头往前还有不少盼头呢，也不愿意想象自己是头驯服的奶牛，让一大群女人和小孩在后面追来撵去。

吃早餐时，我们说话不多。希尔达又处于她那种“我不知道我该咋办”的精神状态，一半是因为黄油的价格，一半是因为圣诞节假期眼看就要过完，而上学期还欠人家五镑学费。我吃了煮鸡蛋，往一片面包上抹了“金王冠”牌果酱。希尔达非要买那种货色，五个半便士一磅，标签上用法律允许范围内的最小字体印着它含有“一定比例的中性果汁”，正是这个，让我议论起了“中性果树”。有时候我会变得很讨人嫌，就像这回。我说我倒想知道这种树长什么样，长在哪个国家，直到最后，希尔达上火了，倒不是在意我挖苦她，她只是隐约觉得我拿她为省钱而买的东西开玩笑，算得上缺德。

我看了一眼报纸，上面却没多少新闻。在西班牙和中国，那里的人在一如既往地互相残杀，在某个火车站候车室发现了一条女人的腿，佐格国王⁴的婚期有点儿悬乎等等。最后，差不多到了十点钟，我出发去市里，比原计划提前不少。孩子们出门去公园玩了。这个早晨可是冷得要命，我踏出前门时，一阵小阴风吹到脖子上肥皂没洗干净的那块地方，让我突然感觉衣服不合身，而且浑身上下都黏糊糊的。

二

你知不知道我住的那条路——西布莱奇里的艾里斯米尔路？你就

算不知道这条，至少也知道别的五十条跟它一模一样的路。

你也知道那些路是怎样在远近郊像脓包一样蔓延的，全都一个样。长长的一排排小型半独立式房子——艾里斯米尔路的门牌号排到了二百二十号，我们家是一百九十一——跟地方当局营造的房子很类似，但总体说来还要更难看，都是拉毛水泥前外墙、女贞树篱、防腐处理过的院门和绿色前门。“月桂”“桃金娘”“山楂树”“吾家港湾”“我心静处”“美妙风景”⁵等等。门号五十几的那家可能属反社会类型，把前门漆成了蓝色，而不是绿色。这家倒是有可能进济贫院呢。

脖子上黏糊糊的感觉让我提不起精神。脖子上黏糊糊的，就能让人觉得沮丧，也算稀奇，这似乎把我的活力全抽走了，就好像在大庭广众之下，突然发现有只鞋子的鞋掌快掉了。那天早上，我对自己可是一点儿幻想也没有，几乎觉得我可以站得远远地看着自己一路走来，就那副长着肥肉、红脸膛、戴假牙、穿着不入流衣服的样子。像我这样的伙计，没办法在别人眼里像是个上等人，就算在两三百码以外看到我，你也可能马上看透我——也许看不出我在保险业这行，但会认为我是个卖赌马票的，或者是个推销员。我穿的衣服几乎可以说是这一行的制服：破旧的人字纹灰色套装，值五十先令的蓝大衣，圆顶礼帽，不戴手套。我的样子，也是典型的靠卖东西挣佣金的人的模样：相貌粗俗，脸皮厚实。我最体面时，也就是穿着新套装或者抽雪茄时，有可能被认为是个登记赌注的或者酒馆老板，但是在样样都很不怎么样时，就可能被认为是个推销吸尘器的，不过你通常还是能把我的准确定位的。“一星期挣五到十镑”，一看到我，你就会这样说。以经济和社会地位而言，我在艾里斯米尔路处于平均水平。

路上几乎只有我一个人，男的都赶去坐八点二十一分的火车了，女的在鼓捣煤气炉。你要是有时间往周围看一看，而且刚好有那种心情时，当你走过这种远近郊的街道，想着住在那里的人们所过的生活时，你会暗自发笑。原因在于说到底，像艾里斯米尔路这里，哪一点能称之为路？无非是监舍排成一排的监狱。在那些排成一条线的半独立式刑讯室里，关着的是一星期挣五到十镑、瑟瑟发抖的可怜小人物。他们每个人左有上司对其吆三喝四，右被老婆骑到了脖子上，像

是一场噩梦，还被孩子像蚂蟥一样吸血。关于工人受苦受难的废话已经不少了，可是对于一无所有的人，我没有什么为他们感到特别难过的。你认识哪个苦力翻来覆去睡不着想着麻袋？那些一无所有之人是身子受罪，可他不干活时，是个自由人。但是在每一个小小的水泥盒子的里头，总是有个可怜鬼，永远不得自由，除了在沉睡时，他会梦到把上司扔进井里，并往他头上扔煤块。

我对自己说，当然，对于像我们这种人来说，最根本的麻烦，是我们都想象自己还拥有什么。首先，艾里斯米尔路上的九成人都有这种印象，以为拥有自己的房子。艾里斯米尔路上，连同周围地区，一直到大街那边，都属于赫斯派莱兹住宅区这个特大骗局的一部分。奇尔弗信贷建房互助会大概是当代最聪明的骗局。我自己干的保险这行我承认是骗钱的，但这是公开的骗局，有什么招数都明明白白。可是建房互助会这一骗局的精彩之处，在于受害人还自以为得到了恩惠，痛揍他们一顿，他们还要来舔你的手。有时候我琢磨可以在赫斯派莱兹住宅区之上，为建房互助会之神树起一座像。这位尊神会与众不同，先不管其他方面如何，它首先会是个阴阳人，上半身应该是个董事总经理，下半身应该像家庭妇女一样。它一只手拿着一条其大无比的钥匙——当然是通向济贫院的——另一只手拿着——那种样子像法国号，往外涌出礼物的叫什么来着？——对了，叫丰饶角⁶，从里面涌出来的是便携式收音机、人寿保险单、假牙、阿司匹林、法国来信、水泥轧草坪机等等。

而实际上，在艾里斯米尔路，我们并不拥有我们的房子，就算我们付款完毕，也不是终身保有的不动产，而仅仅是租赁物。房子的定价为五百五十镑，可以分十六年付清。这种房子也可以付现款一次付清，价格为三百八十镑，这代表奇尔弗信贷从中赚取一百七十镑，但是不用说，奇尔弗信贷赚到的远不止这个数。三百八十镑中包括建筑商的利润，可是奇尔弗信贷挂了另外一块“威尔逊及布鲁姆公司”的牌子自己盖房子，这样又赚了建筑商的利润，要付的只是材料钱。可是它也在材料上赚钱，因为通过另一块牌子“布鲁克斯及斯卡特比公司”，自己卖给自己砖瓦、瓷砖、门、窗户框、沙、水泥等，我想还有玻璃吧。谁要是告诉我它另外还有个化身公司，自己卖给自己木头

加工门和窗户框等等，我根本不会吃惊。还有一件事，本来我们应该能料到的，但在发现时，还是让我们都大吃一惊，那就是奇尔弗信贷的算盘并非永远打得滴水不漏。艾里斯米尔路修好后，留下一片开阔地——这根本算不得什么了不起的事，不过好处是小孩可以在那里玩耍——此处人称普拉特草地。虽然没有什么黑纸白字写着，但大家的共识，是普拉特草地上不会建房。但是西布莱奇里是个发展中的郊区，罗特威尔果酱厂二八年开工，盎格鲁—美利坚全钢自行车厂三三年开工。居民增长，房租也上去了。我从来没见过赫伯特克拉姆爵士或者奇尔弗信贷别的头面人物长什么样，不过我脑子里想象得出他们那副垂涎欲滴的样子。突然建筑商来了，开始在普拉特草地上盖房子。赫斯派莱兹住宅区的居民群情激奋，成立了由租户组成的保卫草地联盟。没用！克拉姆的律师只花五分钟就把我们全整趴下了，普拉特草地上盖起了房子。但是让我觉得克拉姆不愧为准男爵的，是他能在精神上欺骗人，这才是真正阴险的。就因为我们抱有这种幻想，以为我们拥有所居住的房子，便有了“与国攸关”的利益，我们这些赫斯派莱兹住宅区的可怜虫——所有在这种地方住的人们都是——变成了对克拉姆忠心耿耿的奴隶，永世不得翻身。我们都是体面正派的户主——也就是说保皇派，唯唯诺诺的人，蠢不可及的人。不敢杀鸡取卵！想到在付清最后一笔款前，可能会发生什么意外，真让人怕得要死。事实上，并非户主和正在分期付款购买这样的事实，只能让人怕上加怕。我们全被收买了，不仅如此，我们是被自己的钱收买的。那些被压迫的可怜虫拼死拼活工作，却要支付超出正常价格一倍的钱，去购买那种美其名曰“美妙风景”的砖制鸽子笼，可是那里既没风景可看，也无钟可敲⁷。为保卫国家，抵抗布尔什维克主义，那些可怜的笨蛋一个不剩，都会战死沙场。

我转上华尔波尔路，然后上了大街，十点十四分有趟开往伦敦的火车。正要路过六便士商店时，我想起早上就开始记着的要买一包刀片的事。我走到卖肥皂的柜台时，那个叫场内经理还是叫别的什么的人正在痛骂负责那里的女孩。一般说来，那时辰六便士店里没有多少人。有时候，你如果刚开门就进去，可以看到所有女孩排成一排在那里挨早骂，就是为这天的工作被调理一番。听别人说，这种大型连锁

店里有些伙计在挖苦和辱骂人方面独具才能，他们被派出巡回于各家分店，把那些女孩收拾一番。那位场内经理是个丑陋的小个子恶棍，块头不足，肩膀很宽，两撇灰白的胡子又长又尖。他正在为什么事对她大发脾气，很明显是她找钱没找对。他用圆锯开动一般的声音对她吆喝：

“嗬嗬！当然你不会点下数的！当然你不会！一句话，太麻烦了。嗬嗬！”

我收回目光之前，跟那个女孩目光相遇。她在挨骂时，有个红脸膛中年胖子看着，对她来说肯定不是件愉快的事。我马上望向别处，装作对旁边柜台的东西感兴趣，窗帘环什么的。他又冲她来了。他就是那种人，刚转过身，却猛地又杀回来，像只蜻蜓一样。

“你当然不会点一点钱的！我们损失两先令对你来说无关紧要，完全无关紧要。两先令对你来说算什么？别指望要求你费事点对钱了。嗬嗬！除了图你自个儿的方便，一切都无所谓。你从来不为别人考虑，没错吧？”

这样持续了五分钟左右，隔着半个商店都听得到。他老是转过身，让她以为他骂完了，却总是猛地杀回再来一轮。我往远处又挪了一点儿后瞄了他们一眼。那个女孩是个十八岁上下的孩子，很胖，脸型有点像圆月，是那种无论如何永远也不可能找对零钱的人。她的脸白里透红，扭动着身子，实际上是因为痛苦而扭动，就好像他一直在用鞭子抽她，鞭鞭到肉。其他柜台上的女孩装作没听见。他是个相貌丑陋、长得紧凑的小个子恶棍，就是那种短小精悍的男人，挺着胸脯，手放在后衣摆下面，样子像是个准尉，只是个子太矮。你有没有注意到做这种恃强凌弱之事的，经常是些块头不足的男人？他往前挺着一张胡子拉碴的脸盘，几乎要贴上她的脸，以便向她吼得更响，那个女孩则面红耳赤地扭动身子。

最后他合计说得差不多了，就大摇大摆地走开，样子像是海军上将走在军官专用的甲板上，我便走到那个柜台买刀片。他知道我一字不漏全听到了，她也知道，而且他们俩都知道我知道他们知道。可是

最糟糕的是因为我的缘故，那个女孩还不得不装出一副什么都没发生的样子，而且拿出有点儿冷淡、跟你保持距离的态度，那是女售货员应该对男顾客保持的态度。她必须扮出一副长大的年轻小姐模样，就在我看到她像个女仆似的被骂了一顿后的半分钟！她还是面红耳赤，手在颤抖着。我让她拿一便士价钱的刀片，她开始在三便士货品的盘子里摸索着找。就在那时，场内经理那个小个子恶棍又向我们走来，当时我们都以为他要再来一轮。女孩就像狗看到鞭子一样往后缩。但她也在用眼角的余光看我，我明白那是因为我看到她在挨骂，所以她对我恨之入骨。怪哉怪哉！

我买了剃须刀片后就走了。她们干吗要忍受挨骂？我在想。当然完全是因为害怕。敢顶一句嘴就走人，哪里都一样。我想起我们买东西的那间连锁杂货店里，有个偶尔招呼我们的小伙子。他有二十岁，块头庞大，面色红若玫瑰，小臂极粗——他倒应该去铁匠铺干活。在那里，他身穿白褂，腰弯过柜台，一边搓着手一边说：“对，先生！非常对，先生！今年这会儿的天气不错，先生！很高兴为您服务，先生，您来点儿什么？”几乎是请你照他屁股踹一脚——当然是买东西。顾客永远正确。从他脸上，你能看出他怕得要命，你可能投诉他不够礼貌，导致他被炒掉。再说，他又怎么知道你是不是公司到处派出的探子？恐惧！我们在里面沉浮，这就是我们的基本特点。有谁没有因为担心丢工作而吓晕的话，肯定会被战争、或者法西斯、或者共产主义什么的吓晕。犹太人想到希特勒就要冒汗。我脑子里突然想到那个长着又长又尖胡子的小个子混蛋，他他妈很可能比那个女孩更害怕会丢了工作。很可能他有一家人要养活，而且谁也不准，也许在家里，他是个逆来顺受、性情温和的人，在后院种黄瓜，允许老婆骑到身上，让孩子扯他的胡子等等。照此类推，在读到某位西班牙宗教法庭的法官或者俄国秘密警察的某位高官的事迹时，无一例外也会读到他们私底下是很不错的好人，最佳丈夫兼父亲，在照料他那只听话的金丝雀方面不遗余力等等。

肥皂柜台的女孩目送我出了门，她能做到的话，肯定会把我干掉，就因为我看到的事，她对我可真够仇恨的！比起她对场内经理的仇恨，她对我的仇恨绝不止多上一分哩。

当时有架轰炸机正在头顶低飞，有一两分钟时间，看上去似乎跟火车保持同样速度。

坐在我对面的，是两个样子粗俗的伙计，身穿破旧大衣，显然是那种层次最低的推销员，大概是报纸推销员。一个在读《每日邮报》，另一个在读《快报》。从举止上，我看得出他们把我当成了同类人。这节车厢的另一头，有两个带着黑包的律师行办事员，他们的谈话里夹满了法律方面的唬人鬼话，意在哗众取宠，显得跟别人不是一个行当的。

我在看那些一闪而过的房子背面。经过西布莱奇里的这条铁路大部分穿行在贫民区，你可以扫一眼那些小小的后院里在盒子里种的一点儿花，妇女在平房顶上用夹子搭晾衣服，还有挂在墙上的鸟笼，这些都有几分和平气象。那架巨大的黑色轰炸机在空中盘旋一下便疾飞而去，看不到影子了。我坐的位置背对火车头，两个推销员中有一个眼睛跟着它看了有一秒钟，我知道他在想什么，因为每个人都是那样想的。这年头，也不一定非得是个高雅之士才会那样想。再过两年，一年，看到一架那玩意儿我们会怎么着？冲去地下室，吓得尿裤裆，就那样。

那个推销员放下了《每日邮报》。

“催命鬼来了。”

两个律师行办事员正往外进着有学问的屁话，也就是关于非限定处理不动产和虚租金之类。一个推销员在背心口袋里摸索一下，拿出根压扁了的伍德白恩烟，他又在另一个口袋里摸索一下，然后向我倾过身子。

“有火柴吗，胖哥？”

我摸出火柴。你注意到了，他叫我“胖哥”，这真是有意思。有一两分钟，我不再想炸弹的事，而是开始想着我的身材，早上洗澡时也

研究过。

一点儿没错，我是个胖子，事实上，我的上半身几乎跟个木桶一模一样。不过让我觉得有意思的是，就因为你刚好胖了那么一点点，几乎任何人——就连素不相识的人，也会理所当然叫你外号，而这个外号又是对你外表的侮辱性称呼。假如有这么一个伙计驼背或者斜视，要么是兔唇，你会不会叫他外号，让他别忘了他的驼背、斜眼或者兔唇？但每个胖人都顺理成章被人这么叫外号。我就属于那种人，总是被别人很自然地拍拍背，捅下肋骨，而且他们几乎无一例外，都以为我喜欢那样。每次我走进普德利的“皇冠”旅馆的酒吧时（我出差每星期都经过那里一次），总要被沃特斯这个混蛋——他是西福姆牌肥皂的推销员，在那里是个差不多无日不到的常客——捅一下肋骨，嘴里还唱着“可怜的保灵伙计，身上可是嘛一大坨”。这就是那些操蛋的蠢货百开不厌的玩笑。沃特斯的指头就像铁条，他们还都以为胖人没什么感觉呢。

那个推销员又拿了根我的火柴来剔牙，然后把整盒火柴扔还给我。火车嗖嗖地开上一座铁桥，在下面，我看到有面包厂的货车以及长长一溜运水泥的卡车。我心想，这真是件古怪事，从某种意义上说，他们对胖人的看法也没错。实际上胖人，特别是生来就胖的人——就算小时候起吧——跟别人不大一样，他所过的日子跟别人不在同一层面上，那是种轻喜剧的层面，但对于市场上的杂耍演员或任何一个体重超过二百八十磅的人，他们的日子与其说是轻喜剧，倒不如说是场低级闹剧。我这辈子胖过也瘦过，知道长胖对人们观念上的影响，长胖这件事，好像让人变得不会对事情太较真。如果有人从来就是个胖子，打会走路时就被叫作“胖子”，我怀疑他根本就不知道有较深层的感情。他怎么会知道呢？他从来没有体验过那种感情。他从来不会出现在一个悲剧场景里，因为有胖人出场，就不能叫悲剧，而是喜剧。打个比方，你能想象哈姆雷特是个胖子吗？要不然想象一下奥利弗·哈代⁸扮演罗密欧的样子吧。很有趣，几天前我在读一本小说时，还多少想起了这方面。那本书是从布茨图书馆借的，名叫《浪费的热情》，里面有个伙计发现他的女人跟别人跑了。他是那种你会在小说里读到的人物，脸色苍白，样子敏感，黑头发，有私人收入。我

隐约记得有一段是这样的：

戴维在房间里来回踱着，手压在额头上。这则消息好像把他吓呆了。有很长时间，他不相信这是真的。西拉对他不忠！不可能！他突然恍然大悟，看到了赤裸裸的惊人事实。他受不了了，突然呼天抢地哭了起来。

反正类似这样吧。当初读到时我就琢磨过，现在你也读到了，就是这样，这就是人们——有些人——预料中的动作。但如果换了像我这样的人又当如何？假如说希尔达在外面跟别人过了个周末——倒不是说我他妈有所谓，事实上如果发现她还剩那么一点儿活力，我还会很高兴呢——但是假如我在乎，我会不会呼天抢地哭将起来？谁会认为我会那样？看我这体形，你就不会认为我会。我会的话，那可真是彻底让人作呕呢。

火车正在沿着一条河堤前进，下方稍低一点儿，可以看到房顶一片接一片延伸着，都是将要挨炸弹的小红屋顶，那会儿由于一线阳光照着，所以有了点儿亮色。说来古怪，我们老是想着炸弹的事。当然，毫无疑问不用多久炸弹就会往下掉，你可以从报纸上他们所说的打气话里估计出距离那天还有多远。前不久我在《新闻报》上读到一篇文章说如今的轰炸机根本不会造成什么损失，高射炮现在已经很不错，轰炸机只能在保持飞行在两千英尺高度。你看，那位老兄以为如果飞机飞得很高，炸弹就掉不到地上。更有可能，他真正的意思是说炸弹会炸不中伍尔维奇军工厂，而只会炸中像艾里斯米尔路这种地方。

不过大体上说，我觉得长得胖也不算太差劲，有一点便是胖人总是受欢迎。从登记赌注的到主教，事实上，胖子跟任何一行的人都能相处融洽，随便而自然。至于在结交女人方面，胖人比人们看起来想象的还要走运。想象女人把胖子仅仅当成笑料，只不过是无稽之谈，但有人确这么想。事实上，无论哪个男人，只要会哄女人说爱她，就不可能被她当作笑料。

我提醒你，我并非一直都胖，胖起来是过去八九年间的事，但胖

人的脾性我都已经具备。但同样的事实是，内在意义上，在精神上，我并非全是胖的。别！别误解我，我不是刻意把自己装扮成什么嫩花朵，笑脸之后却是一颗受苦的心等等。我要是有一点儿像那样，就别在保险这个圈子里混了。我俗，感觉迟钝，能融入周围环境。只要世界上还能靠卖东西赚佣金，只要能靠着厚脸皮、感情粗糙混口饭吃，像我这样的伙计就会干。几乎在任何情况下，我都能混口饭吃——从来只是混口饭吃，永远发不了大财——甚至在战争、革命、瘟疫和饥荒到来时，我也会撑着比多数人多活一口气。我就是那种人。可是我的内心里还有些别的，主要是过去的一些残留，以后再跟你说这个。我外表是胖，但内在的我是瘦的。你有没有想到过每个胖人的内部都有个瘦子，就像有人所说，每块石头里都有座雕像？

那个借了我火柴的伙计读着《快报》，正对他的牙大剔特别。

“断腿案好像没啥进展。”他说。

“他们永远都不可能抓到人。”另一个说，“你怎么能辨认出那是谁的腿？可不都他妈一样嘛，对不对？”

“也许能通过裹腿的纸抓到人。”头一个伙计说。

往下面看，可以看到房顶一片接一片延伸着，随着街道左扭右拐，可还是延伸啊延伸，如同一片广阔的平原，可以驰骋其上。无论从哪个方向横穿伦敦，都有二十英里的房子，没个断口。天哪！轰炸机飞来的话，怎么会炸不中？我们就是个其大无比的靶子嘛。而且来时很可能没有预警，因为这年头，谁会傻帽儿似地先宣后战？我要是希特勒，就会在正开着裁军会议的时候把轰炸机派过来，就在哪个平静的清晨，伦敦桥上是不息的职员，金丝雀在歌唱，老太太在绳子上晾裤子——嗡，嗖，咚！房子飞上了天，裤子浸满了血，金丝雀在尸体上继续歌唱。

我想不管怎么样，那好像有点儿惨。我看着房顶的海洋没边没沿地延伸。几英里几英里长的街道，炸鱼铺，铁皮屋顶教堂，电影院，后街里的印刷铺，工厂，一区的公寓楼，一处处的马厩，奶牛场，

发电站——没边没沿，无限延伸。多么广阔！还有那种和平气氛！像是大荒原，却没有野兽。没人开枪，没人扔手雷，没人拿着胶皮警棍痛揍别人。你要是想到的话，此时此刻，在整个英国，也大概没有一间睡房里有人在用机关枪向外扫射。

但五年后会如何？要么两年后？要么一年？

四

我把几份文件放到了办公室。华纳是那种收费低廉的美国牙医，他有间诊室，他喜欢称之为“店堂”，从我的办公室过去要走半个街区，这是个大街区，全是办公楼，他的地方在一间照相馆和一间橡胶制品批发店中间。离我预约的时间还早一些，可是也到时间去找点儿吃的了。我不知道中了哪门子的邪，进了一间牛奶吧，这种地方我一向避之则吉。对于我们这些一星期挣五到十镑的人，别想在伦敦的餐馆里得到优质服务。如果你为一顿饭能花的钱是一先令三便士，要么到里昂斯，要么到“快速乳品”之类的地方。你要是没打算花那么多钱，就只能吃酒馆里供应的劣等快餐：一品脱苦啤和一块比啤酒还凉的馅饼。牛奶吧外面，报童在叫卖晚报的头一叠。

鲜红色的柜台后面，有个戴着高顶白帽的女孩在捣鼓冰箱，后面不知哪里有台收音机在开着，叮叮咚咚，有点儿像敲打锡皮的声音。我他妈来这里干吗？走进的时候，我还在想。这里的气氛让我觉得很没劲。一切都是漂亮、闪闪发光、最新潮的，往哪儿看都有镜子、搪瓷和不锈钢盘子。在装潢设计上不遗余力，但不是在食物上。根本没有什么真正的食品，只有一连串带美国名字的货色，是种匪夷所思的玩意儿，不仅品不出味，而且简直让人不能相信世界上竟有此物。什么都是从木板箱里或者罐头里取出来，要么从冰箱里拖出来，或者从龙头里喷出来，或者从管子里挤出来。无舒适可言，也没有可以独处的地方。坐在高凳子上，就在一条窄窄的台子上吃，被镜子所包围。那里混合了收音机的噪音，弥漫着一种宣传味，达到的效果是食物无关紧要，舒不舒服无关紧要，除了漂亮、闪闪发光、最新潮，什么都无关紧要。这年头什么都是最新潮的，就连希特勒正在给你准备

的子弹也是。我要了一大杯咖啡和两根德式香肠，戴白帽的女孩一把塞给我，就像给金鱼喂蚂蚁卵一样，漠不关心。

门外有个报童喊着“看《旗报》咧！”我看到有张海报在拍打他的膝盖：“腿；最新发现。”你也注意到了，只说“腿”，已经简略成那样。两天前，有人在火车站候车室发现了两条女人腿，装在牛皮纸袋里，报纸上已经连续登了好几天。全国人民应该对这两条残腿极其感兴趣，所以不用进一步介绍。这两条腿是目前出现在新闻里仅有的两条腿。真古怪，我边吃面包卷边想，现在这年头杀人案真是越来越乏味了，老是这样把人肢解了，然后把碎片扔到全国各地，远不如以前的家庭投毒案来得精彩，比如克里彭案、塞顿案、梅布里克太太案⁹。照我看，除非你愿意被人批评得一塌糊涂，否则你杀人也会杀得更漂亮一点儿。

就在这时，我咬了一口德式香肠——我的天！

老实说，我也没指望这玩意儿能有什么好滋味，我原以为它跟面包卷一样没味道，可是这个——唉，真是大饱口福啊。还是让我试着给你说明一下吧。

不用说，那条德式香肠外面是一层橡胶皮。我暂时用的假牙戴着不太合适，只能用一种拉锯式的动作把香肠咬开。说得迟，那时快——噗！有种烂梨一样的东西在嘴里迸开来。整条舌头都沾上一种让人讨厌之极的软东西。那味道！有一阵子我难以置信。后来我又用舌头转了一下，再试试味道。是鱼！一条香肠，自称德式香肠，却塞的是鱼！我站起身直接就出了门，碰都没碰咖啡，天晓得那又会是什么味！

在外面，报童把《旗报》塞到我面前，嘴里还吆喝着：“腿！惊人发现！最热门！腿！腿！”我的舌头还在搅动那玩意儿，不知道吐到哪里。我想起在报纸上读到过的关于德国食品厂的一些事，在那里，一切都是由另外一种东西所制成。“人造”，他们是这样叫的。我记得我读到过他们用鱼造香肠，鱼则毫无疑问，是用别的东西所造。我有种感觉我是咬开了现代社会，并发现了它的真实成分。这年头，

我们就是这样生活的。一切都是漂亮的、最新潮的，什么都是由别的东西所造。到处都是赛璐珞、橡胶、不锈钢、彻夜不息的弧光灯、头顶上的玻璃屋顶、放着同样调子的收音机。没有植被，水泥覆盖了一切，假甲鱼¹⁰在“中性”果树下吃着草。当你回到具体问题，认真对待比如香肠这样实打实的东西时，这就是你得到的：塞在橡胶皮里的烂鱼，这种肮脏污秽的炸弹在嘴里迸开来。

拿到假牙后，我感觉好多了。假牙在牙床上严丝合缝，虽说所谓假牙能让你感觉年轻的说法听着像是胡扯，可事实上，真的有这种效果。我试着面对一面商店橱窗上照出来的自己咧嘴而笑，假牙很不错。华纳医生虽说收费便宜，可他有点儿艺术家气质，他也不是刻意把你搞得好像长了一口牙膏广告里的那种好牙齿。他有个很大的橱柜，里面放满假牙——他给我看过一次——全部根据大小及颜色分好类，他在挑选时，像是珠宝商在为项链选配宝石。十个人里头有九个会以为我的牙齿是原装的呢。

在另外一面橱窗上，我看到了自己全身的样子，我突然想到说真的，我这个人的体形也未必那样差。我承认的确有点儿显胖，可也不是讨人嫌，只是裁缝所说的“体态丰满”而已，而且有些女的还就喜欢红脸膛男人呢。我想我这把老骨头还有点儿精神哪。想起那十七镑，我打定主意要花在女人身上。当时离酒吧关门还有段时间，可以去喝点儿啤酒，也就是给这副假牙来个启用仪式。因为那十七镑的缘故，我有种富有的感觉。经过一间烟草铺时，我买了根六便士一根的雪茄，是我情有独钟的那种，它长八英寸，里里外外保证是纯哈瓦那烟叶所制。但是照我估计，哈瓦那的卷心菜还不是跟其他地方的长得一个样。

走出酒吧后，我感觉焕然一新。

我喝了一两品脱啤酒，五脏六腑都暖热了。雪茄的烟雾缭绕着我的新假牙，给了我一种新鲜、清爽、平和的感觉。突然，我感到自己若有所思，有点儿哲人的味道，部分原因是我没有工作要做。我脑子回到当天上午我关于战争的想法上去了，当时有轰炸机在火车顶上

飞。我感觉处于能先知先觉的精神状态下，在此状态下，我能预见到世界末日，这样想着，也多少有了点儿兴奋感。

我正沿着滨河大街向西走，虽然天气有点儿冷，可是我走得慢腾腾的，享受我的雪茄。一如平常，人行道上川流不息，中间几乎闯都闯不出一条路。所有人脸上，都是那种神经兮兮的固定表情，跟伦敦街道上人们的表情一个样。还有惯有的交通堵塞。红色的公共汽车在小汽车中间左拱右拱前进，发动机在轰鸣，喇叭嘟嘟响。我在想，这噪音大得能吵醒死人，却吵不醒这群人。我感觉自己似乎是在梦游人之城中唯一一个醒着的人。当然，这是幻象，可要是你行走在一群陌生人中间，几乎不可能不想象他们都是蜡人，不过他们也大概正是这样想象你的。这些天，我总是有这种带点儿预见性的感觉，预见到战争已经近在眼前，而它将终结一切。我对这种感觉不陌生，我们都有这种感觉，多少而已。我想甚至在此时，在旁边经过的人群中，就一定有些伙计脑子里在想象炸弹爆炸和泥浆。无论你想什么，同一时刻总会有一百万人也在这样想。可那就是我所感到的。我们都在一条失火的船上，除了我没人知道。看着川流不息经过的那些蠢面孔，我想他们都像十一月的火鸡那样，没错，对自己即将遭遇何事一无所感。我眼里好像能射出X光，可以看到骷髅在行进。

我再往将来看几年，看到比如说再过五年或者三年开战之后这条街道的样子（据说时间定在一九四一年）。

不，不是一切都会夷为平地，只会有些小小的变化，有点儿是坑坑洼洼、脏乎乎的。商店几乎全空了，而且灰尘多得看不到里面。一条小街上，有个巨大的炸弹坑，整个街区的楼房都被烧空了，看着像是蛀牙。那是颗燃烧弹。到处一片寂静，令人生疑。人们都很瘦削。一排士兵在街上操练着过来了，每一个都骨瘦如柴，拖着步子。那个准尉蓄着螺丝刀一样的胡子，身子笔挺。他也瘦，而且咳起来时，几乎要把整个人咳散了架。在咳嗽间隙，他像在操练场上那样大声训斥士兵：“嗨，说你呢，琼斯！抬起头！你干吗老盯着地上？烟屁股几年前都给人拣光了。”突然他又咳上了，他想停下来，不成。他身子弯得像把曲尺，几乎要把五脏六腑都咳出来，脸红了又紫，胡子耷拉

着，眼里都出水了。

我能听到空袭警报在响，大喇叭在声震屋宇地播报我们的光荣之师又俘敌十万。我还看到伯明翰市的一幢被掀了顶层的楼房，还有一个五岁的孩子在没完没了号啕着想要一片面包。突然，那个当妈的再也受不了了，对着他呼喝起来：“闭上你的臭嘴，你这个小杂种！”接着她拎起小孩的衣服狠揍了他一顿，因为面包没有了，也不会有。我全看到了。我看到海报和排队领食物的长龙，还有蓖麻油¹¹、胶皮警棍和从睡房里向外扫射的机关枪。

这会来吗？不知道。有时候我绝对不相信会来，有时候我告诉自己这不过是报纸制造出的一场虚惊，有时候我打骨子里相信那是在劫难逃。

我快走到查令十字街时，报童在叫卖晚报的后一叠，有更多关于谋杀案的无聊东西。腿；著名外科医生的说法。然后，又有张海报吸引了我：佐格国王的婚礼被推迟。佐格国王！瞧这名字！哪个伙计要是起了这样的名字，十有八九你会相信他是个浑身乌黑发亮的食人番。

偏偏就在那时，发生了一件稀奇古怪的事情。佐格国王的名字唤醒了我的记忆，但是据我估计，因为那天已经看到过这个名字好几次，所以应该是和街上交通中的某种声音，要么是马粪的气味，要么是和别的什么一起，唤醒了我的记忆。

往事耐人寻味，它与你片刻不离。我想没有一个时刻你不会想起十年前或者二十年前发生过的事，但多数情况下，往事并非有形可具，而只是你记着的一系列事实，就像历史课本上那一大堆玩意儿。然后，碰巧的一眼所见，某种声音，或者某种气味——特别是后者——会将你触动，往事不仅回来了，你实际上置身于往事中，就像那个时刻的我。

我回到了下宾菲尔德的教堂里，那是三十八年前的事。我想从外表上看，我仍在沿滨河大街走着，是个口戴假牙、头戴礼帽、四十五

岁的胖子，然而内在的是乔治·保灵，七岁，是谷类及种子商塞缪尔·保灵的小儿子，住在下宾菲尔德大街五十七号。而这天是礼拜天上午，我能闻到教堂的气味。我闻着的就是教堂的气味！你也知道教堂里的那种气味，有点儿奇特、潮湿、灰尘、腐败、甜丝丝的气味，还多少有点儿蜡烛油的气味，兴许还有股熏香味和疑似是耗子的气味。礼拜天上午，还多了黄肥皂和哗叽呢衣服的气味，但主要是那种甜丝丝的气味，再加上灰尘味和霉味，就像死亡跟生命混合起来的气味。说真的，那是变成灰的尸体味。

我那时差不多四英尺高，正站在祈祷跪垫上，好不让前一排人挡住视线。我能感到我的手按着我妈的黑哗叽呢衣服，也能感觉到拉得高过膝盖的袜子——当时我们总是那样穿——还能感到大人总是在礼拜天上午套上我脖子的那种伊顿领¹²，边缘像锯齿一样。我能听到管风琴呼哧呼哧地响着，有两个特大的嗓门在吼唱赞美诗。我们教堂里有两个男的领唱，实际上他们一开始领唱，别人几乎全没机会唱了。两人一个是舒特，卖鱼的，另一个是老维瑟罗尔，是个木匠兼丧事承办人。他们一贯坐在最靠近布道台的长椅上正厅两端，刚好遥遥相对。舒特是个矮胖子，脸色很是粉红，面光鼻大，胡须往下垂着，下巴长得像是要跟他的嘴巴分家。维瑟罗尔跟他截然不同。他是个身材高大、瘦削有力的老家伙，年约六十，面如死尸，头上长满半英寸长的灰白硬发。我从来没见过哪个活人长得跟骷髅一模一样。他脸上可以看到头颅的条条道道，皮肤状如羊皮纸，瘦长脸，一嘴黄牙，上一开一合，就像在自动化博物馆里看到的骷髅。他尽管瘦，可看上去跟铁打的一样结实，好像会长命百岁，直到给教堂里的每个人做完棺材后才会咽气。他们的声音也颇不一样。舒特发出的是种绝望痛苦的吼叫，像是有人拿刀子顶着他的喉咙，他正在做最后的呼救。而维瑟罗尔发出的，则来自他体内很深的地方。来势雄浑、轰隆震荡的噪音，就好像地底下有人把大木桶滚来滚去。无论他发出的噪音有多大，还总是能感觉到仍有更多的有待发出。小孩子给他起了个外号，叫“轰隆肚”。

他们经常造成一种轮唱的效果，特别是在唱赞美诗时，总是维瑟罗尔唱结尾一句。我想他们私下里实际上是朋友，但我以小孩子的心

理，总想象他们是不共戴天的死敌，在攒着劲吼过对方。舒特高唱“上帝是我的牧者”，维瑟罗尔就接上“因此我一无所缺”，完全淹没了舒特的声音。你总是能分辨出两人的高下。我经常特别盼望唱到某一节赞美诗，里面有几句是关于亚摩利王西宏和巴珊王噩¹³的（就是佐格国王的名字让我想起来的）。舒特先唱“亚摩利王西宏”，然后可能隔了半秒，能听到别的教徒唱道“和”，接着维瑟罗尔极其浑厚的低音出来了，他唱“巴珊王噩”唱得就像滚滚波浪般，席卷了每个人。我真希望你能听到他唱“噩”这个音时，发出的极其浑厚、轰轰隆隆、从地底响起的木桶滚动声。他甚至刚好接上了“和”的音，结果是我还很小时，以为那是巴珊王“狗”¹⁴。后来把名字弄对后，我在脑子里形成了西宏和噩的形象，把他们看作我在平价百科全书上看到的大型埃及雕像：巨型石像有三十英尺高，在各自的王位上相向而坐，手放在膝上，脸上带着一丝神秘的微笑。

那一切可不全想起来了！那种不寻常的感觉——只是一种感觉，你不能把它描写成一种行为——这种感觉，就是以前称之为“教堂”的感觉：那种甜丝丝的尸体味，礼拜天人们所穿衣服的窸窣声，管风琴的呼啸声，窗户洞漏进来的一块光斑蠕动着扫过教堂中部。从某种意义上说，那些成年人可以自欺欺人地认为这种非同寻常的表演必不可少，认为是理所当然的事，就像对待《圣经》一样。那年头，《圣经》可是天天读，时时念。每面墙上都有经文，《旧约》的整章整章都铭记于心。甚至到了现在，我的脑子里还是塞满了《圣经》里的点点滴滴：以色列的子民在上帝眼皮底下干坏事；亚设遵守契约；跟着他们从但一直到别是巴¹⁵；戳他第五根肋骨的地方，所以他死了¹⁶。你从来不会理解这些，没试过，也不想。它就像某种药，味道怪怪的，你必须吞下去，心里明白从某种意义上说，需要这么做。还有一些有着示每、尼布甲尼撒、亚希多弗、哈示巴达达¹⁷这些名字的人们不寻常的七扯八扯的事情。穿着又长又硬的袍子，长着亚述式胡子的人骑着骆驼跑到这里，跑到那里，在神殿里和松树下做着不同寻常的事情。焚烧祭品，在烈火的窑里走，钉上十字架，被鲸鱼吞下等等，所有这些，都跟那种甜丝丝的墓地气味、哔叽呢衣服及管风琴的呼啸声混合在一起。

那就是我看到关于佐格国王的海报时，脑子里回想起的世界。有那么一阵子，我不仅想起来了，而且就身处其中。当然，这种感觉持续不了几秒钟。过了一会儿，我好像又睁开眼睛，还是四十五岁的我，滨河大街上依然交通堵塞，但余效仍在。有时从一系列思绪中回到现实后，你的感觉会像从深水里出来，这次感觉却好像换了个儿，我回到了一九〇〇年，呼吸着真正的空气。这么说吧，甚至在那会儿，我睁着眼，那些熙来攘往的操蛋蠢货、海报、汽油味、发动机的轰鸣声在我看来，似乎并不比三十八年前下宾菲尔德的礼拜天上午更具真实感。

我扔掉雪茄继续慢慢地走。我能闻到尸体的气味，而且说起来，我这会儿还能闻到。我回到了下宾菲尔德，年份是一九〇〇年。市场上，在马槽旁边，运货行的马匹正在吃饲料；糖果店里，威勒大妈正在称量半份白兰地酒味糖；兰普林太太的马车驶过，赶车的男仆坐在刷了白漆的后尾座上，抱着胳膊；伊齐其尔叔叔在骂张伯伦¹⁸；征新兵的中士身穿猩红色短上衣和蓝色紧身军装裤，头戴圆筒帽，手拧胡须神气活现地溜达；醉汉在乔治旅馆后面的院子里呕吐；维多利亚女王在温莎城堡；上帝在天堂；耶稣在十字架上；约拿在鲸鱼肚子里；沙得拉、米煞、亚伯尼歌在烈火熊熊的窑里¹⁹；亚摩利王西宏和巴珊王噩坐在王座上对望——准确点儿说，什么都没做，只是存在着，保持在他们的指定位置，就像壁炉里两个撑木柴的架子，或者说是雄狮和独角兽²⁰。

是否一去就不复返了？说不准，可是我告诉你，那是个不错的世界。我属于它，你也是。

第二部

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看到海报上佐格国王名字时，片刻之间，我想起来的世界跟现在所处的太不一样了，我曾属于那个世界，你可能还有点儿难以置信呢。

我想到现在，你脑子里已经有了一副我的形象——中年胖子，戴假牙，红脸膛——而且在你的潜意识里，可能想象我甚至自打睡在摇篮里时起就是这个样子，从来没变过。可是四十五年够长的了，尽管有的人不变化，没发展，但别人会。我就已经改变了许多，有过上下沉浮的经历，但多数时候是上浮的。说起来可能有点儿怪，但要是我爸能看到我现在的样子，他会为我感到很骄傲。他会觉得他的儿子拥有一辆小汽车，住在带浴室的房子里，是件了不得的事。就算到现在，我也混得比自己的出身强一点儿，别的时候我所达到的层次，也是在战前的老时候想都没想到过的。

战前！我不知道还有多久能这样说？还有多久答话就会变成“哪次战争”？对我而言，人们说起“战前”时想起来的理想时代，极有可能指的是布尔战争²¹之前。我生于一八九三年，实际上还记得布尔战争爆发，因为我爸和伊齐其尔叔叔为此大吵过一架。我还记得战争爆发前一年左右的事。

我记得的头一样，就是豆料壳的气味，沿着石板路从厨房走向铺子，这种气味会越来越浓。我妈在门口那里装了道木栅栏，以防止我和乔（乔是我哥）进入铺子，我还记得我手抓木栅站在那里。豆料味混合着潮湿灰泥味，是属于那条小道的的气味。直到几年后，我才能在铺子里没人时挤过栅栏。一只在磨粉箱里大吃的耗子突然扑通一声跳出来，从我两脚中间跑掉了。它身上沾满了磨粉，浑身白色。这肯定

是我六岁左右时的事。

在你很小的时候，对很久以来就在眼前的东西，好像突然间，你才第一次意识到存在那些东西，周围事物逐一进入你的脑海，很像一觉醒来时一样。例如，直到快四岁时，我才突然意识到我们家有一条狗，它的名字叫尼勒，是如今已经绝种的一种白色英国老猎犬。我在厨房里的桌子下面看到它，不知怎么，似乎到那时，才领会到它是我们家的，名字叫尼勒，之前我从来不知道。同样，比那稍早一些时候，我发现小路尽头的栅栏那边有个地方，豆料味就来自那里。铺子里有巨大的磅秤、木制量具、锡铲和窗户上的白色字母，还有笼养的红腹灰雀——这些甚至从人行道上也看不太清楚，因为窗户总是灰蒙蒙的——这些东西在我脑子里就像拼图小块一样，一一就位。

时光流逝，我的腿长壮实了，慢慢开始有了地理概念。我想下宾菲尔德正像任何别的有两千人口的集镇一样。它当时在牛津郡²²——你会注意到，我老是说当时，虽然这地方现在还在——离泰晤士河约五英里，坐落在一个多少算是山谷的地方，它和泰晤士河之间隔着一带低缓起伏的山丘，镇背面的山高一些，山上一团团微蓝色的是树林。还能看到树林间有座带柱廊的白色大房子，那是宾菲尔德大屋（人们都叫它“城堡”）。山顶有个名字叫上宾菲尔德，可是那里没村子，过去一百年或者更久的时间里也没有过。我注意到宾菲尔德大屋所在位置时，肯定是七岁左右的事。很小时，你不会往远处看，可是到那时，我已经对镇子的里里外外熟透了。这个镇的形状大致像是个十字架，市场在中心位置。我们家的铺子在快到市场的大街上，拐角地方是威勒太太的糖果铺，有半便士的话，可以去那里花掉。威勒大妈是个脏老太婆，人们怀疑她舔过那些硬薄荷糖又放回瓶子，可是这件事从未得到证实。再往前走一点儿是间理发店，挂着阿卜杜拉牌香烟的广告——就是上面有埃及士兵的那种，很奇怪，他们至今仍然使用这样的广告——还有酒味很大的月桂油香水和拉塔其亚烟草²³味。房子后面，可以看到啤酒厂的烟囱。市场中央有座石制马槽，水面上总有一层厚厚的灰尘和麸皮。

战前，特别是布尔战争前，一年到头都是夏天。我很清楚那是个

幻象，只是想告诉你我想起的事情都是怎么样的。要是我闭上眼，想着下宾菲尔德在我八岁之前的样子吧，我想起来的，总是夏天时的样子：要么是吃中午饭时候的市场，似乎有种枯燥的、令人恹恹欲睡的沉寂笼罩着一切，运货行的马把嘴深深伸进饲料袋咀嚼着；要么是某个夏天的炎热下午在镇周围绿油油的广阔草地上；要么是黄昏时分在菜地后面的小路上，树篱间缭绕着烟斗和晚紫罗兰的气味。但是在某种意义上说，我也记得别的季节，因为我所有的记忆都跟吃的东西密切相关，随着一年中的不同季节而变化，特别是以前经常能从树篱里找到的东西。七月有木莓——可是很少见——黑莓也开始变红能吃了。九月有野梨和榛子——最大的榛子却总是够不着。到后来有山毛榉果和沙果，然后就是在没有其他东西时才会吃的次等吃食，山楂——但味道不怎么样——还有蔷薇果，如果能把绒毛擦干净，有种不错的辣味。当归在初夏时吃着不错，特别在你口渴时，另外有很多种草杆也不错。还有种酸模，跟面包和黄油一起吃味道不错。还有山核桃，还有种酢浆草。在离家很远并且肚子很饿时，车前子也聊胜于无。

乔比我大两岁。我们很小时，我妈经常一星期给凯蒂·西蒙斯八个便士，让她下午带我们去散步。凯蒂她爸在啤酒厂干活，家里有十四个小孩，所以这家人老是在找零七碎八的活干。她那时只有十二岁，乔七岁，我五岁，可是她的思维水平比我们高不到哪儿去。她经常拖着我的胳膊，而且叫我“宝宝”。她刚好能看住我们不让两轮马车轧到或被公牛追，但在说话方面，我们的关系几乎是平等的。我们经常走很远的路，绕来绕去——当然，总是一边摘一边吃着什么——走过菜地旁的小道，穿过鲁帕草地，到米尔农场，那里有个池塘，里面有水螈和小鲤鱼（我和乔长大一点儿后，经常去那里钓鱼）。回来时走上宾菲尔德大路，为的是经过一间糖果铺，就在镇边上。这家糖果铺的位置很差，谁要它谁破产。据我所知，它三次是糖果铺，一次是杂货铺，一次是修自行车铺。不过在小孩子的眼里，它有种奇特的魅力，有时即使没钱买，我们也会走那条路，好把鼻子贴到窗户上往里看。凯蒂和我们合买四分之一便士一份的糖果，争抢她的份额，一点儿也不超脱。那年头，你能买到值四分之一便士的糖果。糖果多数

是一便士四盎司，甚至还有种叫“天堂什锦”的货色，主要是别的瓶子里的碎糖，一便士能买六盎司。还有一种，叫“四分之一便士耐吃糖”，有一码长，半个钟头吃不完。糖老鼠和糖猪一便士能买八个，甘草枪也是这个价。爆米花半便士就能买一大袋，还有种头等糖包，里面包括几种糖块，另外还有个镀金戒指，有时是个哨子，价钱为一便士。这年头是见不着那种头等糖包了，我们那时的许多种糖现在都没影了。有种扁平的白色糖，上面印着格言；还有种盛在椭圆木片盒里的黏糊糊的粉红色玩意儿，是用细小的锡勺子吃的，价钱为半便士，这两样现在都没有了。葛缕子蜜饯也是，巧克力管、糖棍也是，甚至那种叫“上千上万”的，现在也几乎见不到了，那是你只有四分之一便士时可以考虑一买的上佳选择。“便士大物件”又如何？这年头还有没有人见过“便士大物件”？它是个大瓶子，里面盛着超过一夸脱嘶嘶冒气的柠檬水，只要一便士，它是另外一样被战争赶尽杀绝的东西。

回想时，总像是在夏天，我能感到周围的草长得跟我一样高，土地冒着热气，路上有灰尘，暖洋洋的绿色光线透过榛树枝照下来。我能看到我们三个人绕着道走路，吃着从树篱那里找到的东西。凯蒂扯着我的胳膊说：“走吧，宝宝！”有时候向前面的乔吆喝：“乔！你马上给我回来！我要骂你了！”乔长得很壮，头大，还有点儿疙疙瘩瘩的，小腿肚极粗，是那种总去做危险事情的男孩。七岁时，他已经开始穿短裤，厚厚的黑袜子一直拉过膝盖，脚上穿一双大而笨重的靴子，那年头的男孩一定得穿。我当时还穿罩衫——我妈以前给我做的一种亚麻布上下连体衣。凯蒂穿的是破烂到极点的仿大人衣裳，那是她们家的姑娘一个个传下来的。她有一顶大得滑稽的帽子，辫子在帽子后面垂着。她穿着长长的拖地裙，一直拖到地上，脚上穿一双带扣的靴子，后脚跟都踩没了。她长得很小巧，比乔高不了多少，但在“招呼”小孩方面在行。在像她那样的家里，一个小孩儿可能差不多刚断奶，就得去“招呼”别的小孩。有时，她会努力装出一副大人样，淑女样，还会用谚语堵别人的嘴，在她看来，谚语是无法辩驳的。你要是说“我不管”，她张口就来：

不管生来要人管，

不管被人挂起来，

不管被人装进罐，

煮得直到完了蛋。

你要是骂她，她会说“难听话伤不了人骨头”，要么你在吹牛时，“骄傲接着就摔跤”。这句话在某一天倒是千真万确，那是我装作士兵模样昂首阔步前进时，摔倒在牛粪堆上。她家住在一座又小又脏的破房子里，在啤酒厂后面的一条肮脏街道上。那个地方小孩遍地，就像一种虱子。她全家都成功躲过了上学，那年头还是很容易躲的。他们刚学会走路，就开始干跑腿或者别的零七杂八的活。她有个哥哥因为偷萝卜被关了一个月。一年后，当乔长到八岁，野得女孩子管不住时，凯蒂就不再带我们散步了。乔发现她家五个人挤一张床睡，经常拿这件事把她取笑得抬不起头。

可怜的凯蒂！她十五岁时就生了第一个小孩，谁也不知道小孩的爸爸是谁，大概凯蒂自己也说不清楚，很多人认为是她的某个兄弟。济贫院的人抱走了小孩，凯蒂去了沃尔顿干活。不久，她嫁给一个补锅匠，即使按照她家的标准，那也算有贬身份。我最后一次见到她，是在一九一三年，我当时正骑车穿过沃尔顿，经过铁路边几座吓人的木头小屋，周围有木桶板做成的篱笆，一年里某些警察允许的时候，经常有吉卜赛人在那里宿营。一个满脸皱纹的丑老太婆从一间小屋里出来抖搂一张破布垫。她披散着头发，脸色熏黑，看上去至少有五十岁。那是凯蒂，当时肯定有二十七岁了。

二

星期四是赶集日，那些伙计经常一大早就把牲畜赶到市场上。他们的圆脸红得像南瓜，穿着脏乎乎的工装裤，特大号的靴子上沾着干牛粪，手里拿着长长的榛树枝。几个钟头的时间里，市场上一片闹哄哄的：狗在汪汪叫，猪在尖声嚎；买卖商货车上的伙计为了在混乱的人群中挤出一条道，鞭子扯得啪啪响，嘴里还骂骂咧咧；买牛、卖牛、用牛的人吆喝着，手拿树条抽打着。有人牵着一头公牛来市场上

时，总会引起一片喧闹。即使在那个年纪，我已经领悟到绝大多数公牛是于人无害、遵纪守法的牲畜，它们只想悄悄到达牛圈。但对一头公牛来说，如果不能吸引半个镇的人出来看它，追赶它，就被认为算不上一头公牛。有时一些被吓着的牲畜——通常都是半长成的小母牛——往往挣断绳子顺着一条小街冲下去。然后，要是小街上刚好有人，他就会站在路中央把手臂往后抡得像风车片，嘴里还呜呜地叫。这种动作被认为对牲畜有催眠作用，的确，那样也真的能吓住它们。

半晌里，有些农场主会走进铺子用手指捻试种子样品。事实上，我爸很少跟农场主做生意，因为他没有送货马车，而且负担不起长期赊账，但最主要是他的经营范围很窄，只是家禽饲料和供应各个店主的马饲料什么的。米尔农场的布鲁厄老头是个老吝啬鬼，长着灰白色山羊胡子。他总是在铺子里站上半个钟头，手里捻着喂鸡谷，装着漫不经心地把谷粒漏进他的口袋，然后当然总是没什么没买就走人了。到晚上，酒馆里满是醉汉。那时候啤酒二便士一品脱，而且不像现在的啤酒，当时的还有点儿酒劲。整个布尔战争期间，那个负责征新兵的中士每星期四、星期六晚上总是在乔治旅馆的麦芽酒吧，穿戴得正儿八经，花钱很随便。有时候在第二天上午，可以看到他拉着某个极为腼腆、红着脸的农场小伙子，这个小伙子在他醉得看不清时，拿了他一先令，结果花了二十镑才能脱身。他们走过时，镇上的人总是站在自家门口看着他们，一边摇着头，似乎那是场葬礼。“哎呀呀！入伍当兵！想想看吧！那可是个好小伙子！”他们感到震惊，入伍当兵在他们眼里，就像一个姑娘变成妓女一样。对于战争和军队，他们的态度很是耐人寻味。他们拥有根深蒂固的老英国观念，即穿红外套²⁴的都是人渣，谁参军就会死于酗酒，直落地狱。但他们同时又是忠贞的爱国者，他们把国旗贴在窗户上，而且坚定不移地相信英国从来没吃过败仗，也永远不会。同时每个人，就连不信国教的人²⁵也会唱关于“细红线”²⁶和当兵的小伙子在遥远战场上殒命之类的伤感歌曲。那些当兵的小伙子总是“在子弹、炮弹横飞之时”殒命，这我还记得，小时候让我迷惑过。我能理解子弹横飞，可是它让我脑子里有了幅蛤壳在空中飞来飞去的奇怪景象²⁷。马非京²⁸解围时，镇上人们的欢呼声几乎掀翻了房顶。他们也始终坚信布尔人把娃娃扔到空中，然后用刺

刀插透这种传闻。布鲁厄老头受够了小孩子在他背后大喊“克鲁格29！”，到战争快结束时，他把连鬓胡子剃掉了。镇上人们对政府的态度，也是完全一般无二。他们都是立场坚定的英国人，坚信维琪30是古往今来第一女王，外国人一钱不值。但谁都从来不会想到交税，就连养狗牌照费，人们都能躲则躲。

战前和战后，下宾菲尔德都是个自由党选区。战争期间有过一次补缺选举，那次保守党胜了。我当时还太小，不明白都是在干吗，只知道我拥护保守党，因为比较而言，红、蓝两色旗中，我更喜欢蓝色的。我记得那主要是因为有过一个醉汉在乔治旅馆外面脸朝下摔在人行道上，一片兴奋中，根本没人注意到他，结果他在毒太阳底下躺了好几个钟头，他身旁流的血都晒干了。血干后颜色是紫的。到了一九〇六年选举到来时，我年龄大得对它有了些了解，这时我已经是自由党支持者了，因为周围的人全是。镇上的人把保守党候选人一直撵了有半英里地，还把他扔进长满浮萍的池塘。那年头，人们对政治很是正儿八经，经常在选举前几个星期就开始准备臭鸡蛋。

我很小时，布尔战争爆发后，我记得我爸和伊齐其尔叔叔大吵过一架。伊齐其尔叔叔在接着大街的某条街上有间小小的靴子铺，还干一点儿修鞋的营生。他的生意不大，而且呈缩小趋势，但影响不是太大，因为伊齐其尔叔叔没娶老婆。他是我爸的同父异母哥哥，比我爸大很多，至少大二十岁。在我见着他的差不多十五年里，他的样子丝毫没变，是个相貌堂堂的老头，个子很高，白头发，长着我所见过的最白的连鬓胡——就像蓟草种子上的白毛。他的习惯是拍打着皮围裙，身子站得挺直——我想那是腰弯了很久后的反应——然后，他会冲着你的脸大着嗓门表达意见，之后在一连串疹人的咯咯笑声中结束。他是个真正的老式十九世纪自由党人，就是那种不仅问你格拉斯顿31在一八七八年说了什么，还会告诉你答案的人。他还在整个战争期间认死一条理，这种人在下宾菲尔德为数极少。他总是在贬损乔·张伯伦一伙，称他们是“公园大道上的地痞流氓”。我现在好像还能听到他的声音，正在跟我爸争论：“他们，还有那些扔得远远的帝国疆土！那些疆土扔得再远我都无所谓。嘿嘿！”然后是我爸反驳他的声音，平静却充满焦虑，是那种小心谨慎的声音。他提到白人的责任

32，还有当布尔人可耻地对待可怜的黑人时我们的责任问题。伊齐其尔叔叔宣布他支持布尔人，并且自称是个小英格兰人³³之后，他们一星期左右几乎谁也不搭理谁。有关暴行的传闻开始传播时，他们又吵了一架。我爸听到那些传闻忧心忡忡，拿这件事跟伊齐其尔叔叔理论。不管他是不是个英格兰本土主义者，肯定他不会认为布尔人把娃娃扔到空中，然后用刺刀插是件正当的事，即使那是黑娃娃。伊齐其尔叔叔只是冲着他的脸大笑。我爸全弄混了！不是布尔人把娃娃扔到空中，而是英国兵！他总是紧紧抓住我——我当时肯定有五岁了——来演示一番。“扔到半空再插透，就像插青蛙，我告诉你！就像我可能把这个小家伙扔出去一样！”然后，他把我抡起来，几乎要松开手，我当时脑子里有副生动的景象：我飞上半空，然后扑通一声掉到刺刀尖上。

我爸跟伊齐其尔叔叔很不一样。我对我爷爷奶奶所知不多，他们在我出生前就不在了，我只知道我爷爷是个鞋匠，死前没几年娶了个种子商的寡妇，我们那间铺子就是这样来的。这个营生对我爸来说不是很适合，虽然他对这行熟到了家，而且永远在干活。除了礼拜天和一星期内很偶然的某个晚上，我记得他手背和脸上的皱纹里总是沾着磨粉，不多的头发上也是。他三十几岁结的婚，我最初记得他的样子，肯定是他快四十岁时的。他是个小个子，头发有些灰白，言语不多。他总是穿着衬衫，系着白围裙，因为沾着磨粉的原因，总是灰头灰脸的样子。他的头是圆的，蒜头鼻，胡须很浓密，戴眼镜，头发跟我一样是黄油色，但差不多掉光了，而且总是沾着磨粉。我爷爷因为娶了种子商的寡妇而让家境改善许多，所以我爸是在沃尔顿文法学校³⁴上的学，农场主和经济状况较好的买卖商送儿子上的学校就是这间。伊齐其尔叔叔喜欢吹嘘他一辈子从来没上过学，是在干完活后点着蜡烛自学认字的。他比我爸聪明得多，能跟任何人辩论，而且时不时会引用卡莱尔和斯宾塞³⁵的话，顺手拈来。我爸的脑筋转得有点儿慢，他从来不喜欢“读书本”——那是他的说法，他的话说得也不标准。礼拜天下午是他唯一可以真正松口气的时候，他会坐在客厅壁炉边读礼拜天的报纸，按他的话是“读上一通”。他喜欢看《大众报》，我妈喜欢看《世界新闻报》，她认为这份报纸上刊登的谋杀案更多。

我现在好像还能看到他们。礼拜天下午——在夏天，当然总是在夏天——烤猪肉和青菜的气味还在缭绕，我妈坐在壁炉的一边，从最新的谋杀案看起，后来慢慢就张着嘴睡着了。我爸坐在壁炉的另一边，穿着拖鞋，戴着眼镜，费力地看着一块黑乎乎的铅字。那种夏天的软绵绵感觉在周围无所不在，天竺葵摆在橱窗里，有只八哥不知道在哪里咕咕叫，而我在桌子底下读我的《B.O.P》³⁶，假装桌布是个帐篷。之后，在用下午茶时，我爸费劲嚼着小萝卜和葱时，会有点儿像反刍似的讲起他读到的东西：火灾，沉船和上流社会的丑闻，还有当时刚刚问世的飞行器，还有个伙计（我留意到，直到今天，此人在礼拜天报纸上的出现频率是每三年一次）在红海被一条鲸鱼吞下，过了三天才被人拉出，还活着，只是被鲸鱼的胃液漂白了。我爸对这种事总有怀疑，对新飞行器也是，除此之外，他相信他所读到的一切。直到一九〇九年，在下宾菲尔德，谁也不相信有一天人能学会飞翔，大家一致的看法是，如果上帝的本意是要我们飞翔，那他当初就该赐给我们一双翅膀。伊齐其尔叔叔忍不住反驳说，如果上帝的原意是要我们乘车，那他当初就该赐给我们轮子。可是就连他，也不相信有什么新的飞行器。

只有在礼拜天下午，或者是工作日的哪天晚上，我爸在去乔治旅馆喝上半品脱啤酒时，才会关注一下这些事情，其余时间里，他总是被生意上的事占据了差不多全部心思。说真的，也没有那么多事情要做，但他似乎总是在忙，要么在院子后面的阁楼里费力地取放包啊袋啊，要么在柜台后边有点儿灰扑扑的小窝里面，用铅笔头在一个本子上加数。他很诚实，也乐于助人，不遗余力地想提供好的货色，童叟无欺，就算在那年头，这种做法也不是维持生意的上上策。他应该去干一份不起眼的办公室工作，比如说邮政局长，或者乡村火车站的站长。他放不下面子，也没胆量借钱扩展生意，或者是没有眼光，不懂增加新货种。有一点可以说明他的性格：他表现出想象力的唯一一次，是创新性推出了一种喂笼养鸟的混合种子（叫“保灵混合饲料”，在差不多方圆五英里内很有名），那实际上应该归功于伊齐其尔叔叔。伊齐其尔叔叔算是个爱鸟人士，在他那间又小又暗的铺子里，养了许多金翅雀。他的理论是如果笼养鸟总是吃一种食物，就会掉颜

色。铺子后面的院子里，我爸开了一小片地，经常种有二十种左右的野草，上面罩着铁丝网。他把草晒干后，把草籽跟喂金丝鸟的普通种子混合起来。杰基——就是挂在橱窗里的那只红腹灰雀——原意就是为“保灵混合饲料”做广告。不用说，杰基不像多数笼养红腹灰雀那样，它的羽毛颜色从来没变黑。

自打我记事起，我妈就长得胖。毫无疑问，我就是从她那里遗传了脑下腺分泌造成肥胖的这一缺陷，不是这个就是别的，反正就是那种引起肥胖的因素。

我妈的块头很大，比我爸还高一些，头发也比他的浅了很多。她喜欢穿黑裙子，除了在礼拜天，我不记得有什么时候她没有系着围裙。我也记得她总在做饭，这样说得夸张，但也不算太过分。回首多年以前的事情时，你好像会记得某个人总是固定出现在某个特定地点，举动具有其人特点，好像他们总在做着一成不变的事情。这么说吧，想起我爸时，我记得的他总是在柜台后面，头发上沾满了磨粉，正在用一个不时在嘴唇间润湿的铅笔头加数字。我想到伊齐其尔叔叔时，他总是留着带点儿鬼气的白色连鬓胡，正在尽力伸展腰肢并拍打皮围裙。想起我妈时也这样，我记忆中的她，总是在厨房里的桌子上揉一大块面，手臂上沾了一层面粉。

你也知道那年头一般人家里的厨房是什么样：地方很大，里面很暗很低，天花板上横着一道粗大的梁，石头地板，下面还有地窖。一切都显得巨大，要么就是在我还是个小孩时看来如此。有个很大的石制洗涤槽，没有水龙头，而是有座铁制手压水井。餐具柜挡住一面墙，直到房顶。一座庞大的灶台，一个月烧半吨煤，天晓得用石墨处理一遍得多长时间。我妈在桌子上揉一块巨大的扁面团，而我爬来爬去，在木柴捆、煤块以及捕蟑螂罐（那时我们在每个阴暗的角落都放，里面用啤酒作为诱物）之间折腾。时不时，我会爬到桌子那边想讨点儿东西吃。我妈不能容忍在两顿饭中间吃东西，我通常会得到同样的回答：“你给我走开！我不会让你到吃饭时没了胃口。你是眼大肚子小。”不过，她有时候会很难得地给我切一片蜜饯果皮。

我以前喜欢看我妈揉面，看别人干一件熟到家了的活能让人着迷，看一个女人——我指的是一个精通做饭的女人——揉面也是这样。她有种怪异、肃穆、冷漠的神色，是种心满意足的神色，就像祭司在行某种神圣之礼。当然，在她自己心目中，她正是这样的角色。我妈的手臂粗壮，粉红色，总是这一块那一处沾着面粉。做饭时，她的每个动作都极其精确，无比沉着。在她手里，打蛋器、绞肉机、擀面杖用得得心应手。看她做饭的样子，就知道她正沉浸在自己的世界里，处于她所精通的物件中。除了看礼拜天的报纸以及偶尔闲聊外，外面的世界对她来说实际上不存在。虽然她读东西比我爸要轻松一些，而且跟他不一样，除了报纸，她还读中短篇小说，可是她还是无知到了难以置信的程度，我长到十岁才意识到这点。她肯定说不出爱尔兰在英格兰的东边还是西边，我还怀疑直到世界大战爆发前，她还说不出首相是谁。不仅如此，她压根就没兴趣了解那些。后来，我在书上读到在东方国家实行一夫多妻制，还有秘密后宫里关着女人，由黑人太监严加看守这些事时，经常会想到我妈听到这种事会何等震惊，我现在还几乎能听见她的声音：“唉呀呀！把他们的老婆那样关起来！怎么想的！”她也不知道太监是什么人。实际上，她所生活的空间肯定跟一般的“闺房”那样小，几乎同样封闭。甚至是在我们家自己的房子里，有些地方她也从未涉足。她从来不进院子后面的阁楼，也极少进铺子，我想我一次也不记得她曾经招呼过顾客。她不知道东西都放在哪里，也很可能分不清小麦跟燕麦的区别——除非在两者被磨成粉之后。她干吗要知道？铺子是我爸的事，是“男人的活计”。她甚至对钱也没有多大兴趣。她的活计，也就是“女人的活计”，不过是看好家，做好饭，洗好衣服，管好小孩。她要是看到我爸或者别的哪个男的想自己缝扣子，就会很不乐意。

至于一日三餐之类，我们家是那种一切像钟表般准时的家庭，不，不应该说像钟表一般，那样说有机械化的意思，而是多少像是自然规律，就像你肯定太阳明天还会升起一样，你可以肯定早餐明天早晨会放好在桌子上。我妈一辈子都是晚上九点睡觉，早晨五点起床。晚睡的话，她会认为那多少有点儿不道德——有点儿堕落、外国佬做派和贵族气。虽然她不介意给凯蒂·西蒙斯付钱领我和乔去散步，

但她永远不能容忍请一个女人帮忙做家务，她坚定不移地相信请来的女人只会把灰扫到橱柜下面。我们的三餐总是吃得准时，分量也很大——煮牛肉配团子，烤牛肉配约克郡布丁³⁷，煮羊肉配刺山柑，猪头，苹果派，葡萄干布丁配果酱，卷布丁——餐前餐后还有感恩祷告。在当时，该怎样养大孩子的旧观念仍然很有市场，不过正在很快消失。理论上说，如果小孩吃饭时发出太大声音，或者是呛食，或者拒绝“对你有好处”的东西，或者“顶嘴”，就会挨鞭子，睡觉前只让吃面包喝水，不用说，也会被赶离饭桌。实际上在我们家，没有谁受过太多惩戒。相比之下，我妈比较严厉。我爸虽然总是在念叨“棍棒底下出孝子”，不过说真的，他对我们太松了，特别是对乔，他从小就难以管教。我爸经常“就要”把乔痛揍一顿，却从未落实过。他经常给我们讲故事，就是关于他爸拿皮带痛抽他的事，现在我相信那只是他编出来的谎话而已。等到乔长到十二岁，他已经长得够壮，我妈的膝盖也挡不住他。打那以后，谁拿他都没办法。

那时候，父母整天会对孩子说“不准”，这仍然被认为无可厚非。你经常会听到一个男人夸口说要是让他逮到他的儿子吸烟，或者偷苹果，或者掏鸟窝，就会“抽死他的小命”。有那么几家真的抽上了皮带。马鞍匠老拉夫格鲁夫有次逮到他的两个儿子在园子里的棚下边吸烟，分别是十五岁和十六岁的大块头，他把他们痛打一顿，整个镇上的人都能听到。拉夫格鲁夫烟瘾很大。但皮带抽打好像从来没什么效果，没有一个男孩不偷苹果、掏鸟窝，而且或早或晚，都将学会吸烟，但孩子得从严管教的观念仍然很有市场，几乎任何值得一做的事都在被禁止之列，至少理论上如此。照我妈的说法，男孩想干的每件事都是“危险的”。游泳危险，爬树危险，同样危险的，是玩滑梯、打雪仗、吊在马车后面、玩弹弓和灌铅木棍等等，就连钓鱼也危险。除了尼勒、两只猫和红腹灰雀杰基，别的动物全危险。每种动物都独具攻击人的有条不紊的方式：马会咬，蝙蝠钻进头发，地蜈蚣钻进耳朵，天鹅翅膀能扫折人腿，公牛抛起人，蛇“蜇”人。照我妈的说法，所有的蛇都“蜇”人。当我援引《平价百科全书》说蛇不蜇人，只会咬人时，她只是让我不准顶嘴。蜥蜴、慢缺肢蜥、蟾蜍、青蛙和水蝾螈也蜇人。除了苍蝇和蟑螂，所有昆虫都蜇人。几乎所有食物，除了吃

饭时吃的，都要么有毒，要么“对你有害”。生土豆能致命，蘑菇也是——除非是从卖菜的那里买的。生醋栗能让人得腹绞痛，生木莓果导致出皮疹。饭后洗澡会抽筋抽死，割破虎口会得破伤风，在煮过鸡蛋的水里洗手会长疣子。铺子里几乎所有东西都有毒，这也是我妈之所以在门口放置栅栏的原因。喂奶牛的料饼有毒，喂鸡谷也是，芥菜籽和卡什伍德家禽添加料也有毒。吃糖对人不好，两顿饭之间吃东西也不好，可是很奇怪，两顿饭之间吃某些东西我妈总是允许的。她做青梅酱时，总会让我们吃一点儿从上层撇起的糖浆之类的东西，我们经常敞开肚子吃，直到吃得恶心。虽然世界上几乎每种东西都要么危险，要么有毒，可是某些东西具有稀奇古怪的功用，生洋葱几乎包治百病，长筒袜系在脖子上能治喉咙疼，往狗喝的水里放硫黄能开胃。尼勒拉在后门那里的粪便里总是有块硫黄，年复一年留在那里，从来没有融化过。

我家以前在六点钟用下午茶，我妈一般到四点钟前就把家务活干停当了。四点到六点之间，她经常会安安静静地喝上一杯茶，“看她的报纸”——那是她的说法。但事实上，除了在礼拜天，她并不经常看报纸。非礼拜天的报纸上只有当日新闻，偶尔才登谋杀案消息。可是礼拜天报纸的编辑掌握到人们并不是特别在乎谋杀案是不是最新的，手头没有新的谋杀案可登，就会把以前的谋杀案改头换面重新推出，有时甚至远到帕尔默医生案和曼宁夫人案³⁸。我觉得在我妈看来，下宾菲尔德以外的世界主要是个发生着谋杀案的地方。谋杀案对她来说魅力无穷，原因在于如她经常所说，她想象不到怎么会有人坏到这种程度。把他们老婆的喉管割断，把父亲埋到水泥地板下，把孩子扔下井！谁会干出这种事！“开膛手杰克”³⁹引发恐慌时，正是我爸妈结婚前后。我们家以前每天晚上用来挡橱窗的大百叶窗就是那时开始用的。橱窗里装百叶窗当时已经越来越少见，大街上的多数铺子都不用了，可我妈还是觉得装了感觉更安全。据她说，一直以来，她有种很不祥的感觉，那就是“开膛手杰克”正躲在下宾菲尔德。克里彭案件——那是几年以后的事了，我几乎已经成年——对她影响极大。我现在还能听到她的声音：“把他可怜的老婆碎尸后埋进煤窑！多可怕！我要是逮到这家伙，看我怎么收拾他！”说来真怪，她想到把老

婆碎尸的那个小个子美国医生丧尽天良的行径时（如果我没记错，他把骨头全剔干净，并把头颅扔进海里，干得可谓天衣无缝），她的眼里真的涌出了泪水呢。

但在礼拜天以外的时间里她读得最多的是《希尔达居家伴侣》，当时在任何一个像我们这种家庭里，基本上都有这份杂志。事实上它现在还在办，尽管已被淹没在战后涌现的更多供女性阅读的最新潮报刊中。没几天前，我还看到过一份《希尔达居家伴侣》，它也变样了，但是跟多数别的东西相比，变得没那么厉害。如今上面还在连载篇幅极长的长篇小说，一登就是半年（结尾总是“欲知精彩后事，请看下期”）。还有同样的“居家须知”，同样的缝纫机和治疗腿病药物的广告。有变化的主要是字体和插图。那年头女主角的样子只能像是个煮蛋计时器，现在的则要像圆桶。我妈读得不快，但她决心把值三个便士的《希尔达居家伴侣》看够本。她坐在壁炉边的黄色旧扶手椅里，脚搁在铁挡板上，铁架上，里面放了好多茶叶的小水壶在炖着。她辛辛苦苦把《希尔达居家伴侣》从封面读到封底，包括长篇连载、两个短篇、“居家须知”、缝纫机广告、读者来信等等。一期《希尔达居家伴侣》一般能让她读一星期，有几个星期的她甚至没读完。有时候要么是火炉的热劲，要么是夏天下午时绿头苍蝇的嗡嗡声会让她打起盹来。然后在五点四十五那个当儿，她会乍然醒来，看一眼放在壁炉台上的座钟，马上手忙脚乱起来——因为下午茶就要迟了，但是下午茶从来没有迟过一次。

那年头——准确说，是直到一九〇九年——我爸还雇得起一个跑腿的小伙子，他经常把铺子交给他照看，自己过来跟我们用下午茶，他的手背上沾满了磨粉。我妈那会儿就会暂停切面包片，跟我爸说：“他爸，你来做感恩祷告吧。”我们都低着头，我爸会虔诚地咕哝：“为了我们将要食用的——上帝让我们真心感恩——阿门。”后来，乔长大一些后，我妈就会说：“乔，今天你来祷告。”乔就会尖声尖气地做感恩祷告。我妈从来不念：那只能是男的念。

夏天下午时，总有些绿头苍蝇嗡嗡地飞来飞去。我们家的房子不带厕所，在下宾菲尔德，极少人家里有。我想整个镇上肯定有五百座

房子，不用说，带洗澡间的不超过十家，有现在所谓厕所的地方不超过五十家。夏天时，我们家的后院里总有股垃圾箱味。每家的房子里都有虫子，我们家的护墙板里有蟑螂，厨房后面那里有蟋蟀，不用说，铺子里还有黄粉虫。那年头，就连我妈这样以家里收拾得好而自豪的人，也对蟑螂没什么反感，在厨房里，它们像餐具柜和擀面杖一样不可或缺。可是还有别的数不过来的昆虫。凯蒂·西蒙斯所住的啤酒厂后面穷街那儿的房子里，臭虫成灾，我妈或是任何一个店主妻子的家里要是有臭虫，会羞愧死的。实际上，说句不过分的话，我甚至连臭虫长什么样都不知道。

大个绿头苍蝇经常飘然飞进食品橱，在盖肉的铁丝笼上一个劲儿待着。“该死的苍蝇！”人们经常会这样说，但苍蝇是种不可抗力，除了用盖肉笼和粘苍蝇纸，还真的拿它没办法。我刚说过我记得的首先是豆料的气味，但垃圾箱的气味也属于很早期的记忆。我想起我妈那个有石地板、捕蟑螂罐、钢挡板、抹过石墨的炉子的厨房时，好像总是能听到绿头苍蝇在嗡嗡飞，并能闻到垃圾箱的气味，还有尼勒这条老狗，它身上狗的特有气味很强烈，老天为证，世界上肯定还有更难听的声音，更难闻的气味。哪一样你会先听到，一只绿头苍蝇还是一架轰炸机？

三

乔比我早两年去沃尔顿文法学校，我们俩都是满九岁后才去那里上学，过去得骑四英里的自行车，早一趟，晚一趟。我妈一开始很害怕让我们上路，因为当时路上已经有那么一两辆汽车了。

我们在由荷莱特老太太维持的家庭学校里待了几年，多数店主的子女都在那里上学，比去寄宿学校上学更有面子，可是谁都知道荷莱特大妈不过是个老骗子，她作为老师水平没有，误人有余。她年过七十，耳聋得厉害，戴上眼镜还是几乎什么都看不见。她所拥有的所谓教学设施，不过是一根藤条、一面黑板、几本翻成卷心菜样的语法书和二十几张有臭味的书写板。她也就能镇住女生，男生对待她的只有嘲笑，而且什么时候想逃学就逃。曾经发生过一件骇人听闻的丑事：

有个男生用手摸一个女生的衣服，我当时对这种事情还不明白，荷莱特大妈成功地把这件事掩盖了过去。谁要是做了什么特别坏的事，她就会念叨：“我要告诉你爸。”但是她极少真的会那样做。不过我们自己也够聪明的了，看出她不敢老是去告状。就算她拎着藤条找我们算账，她老迈笨拙，躲开她的藤条还算容易。

乔小小年纪，八岁起，就跟一伙惹是生非的男孩混到一起，他们自称“黑手党”，领头的是锡德拉夫格鲁夫，当时有十三岁左右，他爸是马鞍匠，他在家排行老么。其他成员中，有两个家里开铺子，一个啤酒厂跑腿的，还有两个农场来的，他们有时候想办法不干活，跟帮伙一块儿玩上几个钟头。那两个农场来的块头都很大，穿着紧兮兮的灯芯绒裤子，说一口土得掉渣的方言，别的帮伙成员很看不起他们，不过也没人撵他们，因为对动物，他们知道的比别的人多了一倍还不止。他们两人中有个外号叫“黄毛”的，甚至偶尔能徒手捉到兔子。他要是看到草丛里卧着一只兔子，就会像只张开翅膀的老鹰一样扑过去。当时，店主之子、帮工之子以及农场上干活的人之间社会界限分得很清，但一般说来，本地的小孩在长到差不多十六岁前，都不会太把这当作回事。这个帮伙有秘密口令，还有一套入伙考验程序，包括割破手指和吃虫子。他们广而告之地要当人见人怕的亡命之徒，结果当然是混成了人见人烦的角色，干的也就是砸窗户、撵奶牛、卸门环、整担整担偷水果之类的事。有时在冬天，农场主允许进田里时，他们会借一两只雪貂去逮老鼠。他们每个人都有弹弓和灌了铅的打猎棍，而且总是在攒钱好去买一把娱乐用的手枪，当时要五先令，可他们存的从来没超过三便士。夏天时，他们经常去钓鱼、掏鸟窝。乔在荷莱特太太的学校上学时，经常一星期至少逃一次课，就算进了文法学校，他还是能两星期逃一次课。文法学校有个男生，他爸爸是个拍卖商，该男生会摹写任何字体，给他一便士，他就能给你伪造一份你妈妈写的信，信里说你头一天生了病。当然，当时我万分渴望能加入“黑手党”，可乔总是给我泼凉水，说他们不想要什么破小孩跟前撵后的。

真正吸引我的，是想到可以去钓鱼。我八岁了，还从来没有钓过鱼，除了用一便士一个的网兜捞过鱼——用那个，有时能捞到一条背

上长刺的鱼。我妈心惊胆战地不让我们靠近水边一步，她“严禁”钓鱼，那年代的家长什么事都会“严禁”。当时我还没有明白其实拐过墙角，大人就看不到你了。然而一想到钓鱼，我就如痴似狂，激动得难以自抑。许多次，在经过米尔农场的池塘时，我看到过小鲤鱼贴着水面游着晒太阳。有时，池塘角的柳树下，会有一条状若钻石的大鲤鱼突然浮上水面，吞下一只小虫子又潜下去。那条鱼在我看来算得上庞然大物，我想有六英寸长。我曾经几个钟头地把鼻子贴在大街上华莱士商铺的橱窗上，那是一家卖钓具、枪械和自行车的商铺。我经常在夏天的上午躺在那里睡不着觉，回味着乔告诉过我的钓鱼之事，就是怎样和面包糊，浮子怎样猛动，突然往水里钻，然后就感到鱼竿弯了，鱼把钓线往深处拽等等。像这样，鱼及钓具在小孩子的眼里带上某种神话色彩，我觉得这难道不是不言而喻吗？就像有些小孩会如此看待枪以及射击一样，有些则对摩托车或是飞机、马匹等等。这种事情，不是谁能说得清楚或者分析得出的，纯粹是魔力。有天早晨——那是在六月，我肯定有八岁了——我知道乔准备逃学去钓鱼，我决心跟着他。不知怎么，乔猜中了我的心事，穿衣服时，他开始向我发难：

“听着，小乔治！别想着今天你能跟我们一帮玩，待家里吧你。”

“没，我没想，我什么也没想。”

“没错，你想了！你以为能跟我们一帮玩。”

“没，我没有！”

“没错，你想了！”

“没，我没有！”

“没错！你想了！你待家里，我们可不想叫什么操蛋小孩儿跟着。”

乔刚学会“操蛋”这个词，动不动就想说。我爸有次刚好听到他说，发狠说要抽死他的小命，可是他照样没能做到。吃完早饭，乔背

着书包，戴着文法学校的帽子就骑自行车走了，比平时早了五分钟。只要准备逃学，他总是那样提前走。到了我该去荷莱特大妈的学校时，我偷偷溜了，躲在菜地后面的小道上。我知道那帮人会去米尔农场的池塘，就算他们把我干掉，我也要跟着。他们很可能会痛打我一顿，很可能我会赶不及回家吃晚饭，那样我妈就会知道我逃学，然后我会再挨一顿打，可是我都置之度外，为了能跟帮伙去钓鱼，我可以说是孤注一掷。我也够狡猾的，等乔兜了一圈后顺大路直奔米尔农场时，我沿小道跟了上去。我绕着树篱远端的草地走，这样几乎到了池塘时，他们一伙才看见我。那是个很不错的六月天，金凤花长到我膝盖那么高。微风只是轻拂榆树顶部，树叶形成的大团大团的绿云有些像是绸缎般柔顺厚实。那天是上午九点钟，我八岁，包围着我的是早夏气象：纠缠的树篱上野玫瑰仍然开得正艳，天上飘着缕缕白云，远处是矮山和围绕着上宾菲尔德的淡蓝色树林。然而我对这一切不屑一顾，心里想的全是绿色池塘和鲤鱼，还有他们那个带着鱼钩、鱼线及面包糊的帮伙，就好像他们在天堂，而我要加入进去。那时，我开始潜伏着接近他们——一共四个人，乔、锡德·拉夫格鲁夫、跑腿小子，还有另外一个店主的儿子，我想他名叫哈里·巴恩斯。

乔转身看到了我。“老天！”他说，“是我们家小孩儿。”他向我走来，活像一只准备发起攻击的公猫。“喂，说你呢！我怎么跟你说的？你马上给我回家。”

乔和我在火气十足时，说话都会省略掉“H”这个音。我后退一步。

“我不回家。”

“你就得回。”

“乔，打他耳光，”锡德说，“我们可不想叫小孩儿跟着。”

“你回不回去？”

“不回。”

“好，小子！好哎！”

说着他就冲我来了，他追着我跑，一下一下揍我，但是我也不从池塘那里跑开，我绕着圈跑。很快，他抓住我，把我按在地上，膝盖顶着我的膀子，开始拧我的耳朵——他最喜欢那样折磨我，我受不了，嚎叫起来，但还是不肯屈服，不肯回家。突然，其他人倒向我这边，叫乔别再顶着我胸口，要是我想，就留下来吧，那么着，我总算留下了。

他们别的人带了鱼钩、鱼线和一大块面包糊，全装在一个袋子里。我们每个人都从池塘角落处的柳树上折树枝来削。那里离农场房子只有两百码，我们得别让人看见，因为布鲁厄老头对钓鱼很反感，倒不是他会有什么损失，他只用池塘来饮牛，可是他讨厌男孩。他们几个对我在场还有些不情愿，老是让我别挡住亮，还一个劲提醒我还是个小孩子，对钓鱼一窍不通。他们说我总是弄出响动，把鱼全吓走了，事实上，他们任何一个人弄出的响动差不多都是我弄的两倍大。最后，他们不让我坐在旁边，而是打发我去了池塘的另一处，那里水浅，没有多少树荫。他们说我这样的小孩，肯定会把水扑腾来扑腾去，把鱼全吓跑。我被赶到了下三烂的地段，通常不会有鱼过来，这我知道，我似乎有种本能知道鱼躲在哪里。但是不管怎样，我总算在钓鱼了。我坐在长满草的岸上，手里拿着鱼竿，看着红浮子浮在绿水之上，周围的苍蝇嗡嗡地飞来飞去，野薄荷的气味简直能把人熏得闭过气去，可是我心花怒放，尽管脸上还有眼泪印和尘土呢。

天晓得我们在那里坐了多久，时间越来越接近中午，太阳越升越高，可是谁那里都没有鱼咬钩。那天闷热无风，晴朗得不适合钓鱼。浮子浮在水面一动不动。水面下面能看得很深，就像往一块深绿色玻璃里看一样。池塘中间那里，能看见鱼就在水面下晒太阳。有时在塘边水草那里，会有一只水蛭滑水而上，然后四条腿搭在水草上休息，鼻子刚好露出水面。可就是没鱼咬钩，他们一群人老是在大呼小叫有鱼咬钩，却总是自欺欺人。时间越来越长，越来越热，苍蝇简直能把人生吃了，岸上的野薄荷气味就像惠尔勒大妈的糖果铺里的。我越来越饿，而且想到不知道有没有中午饭吃时，更是越发饿得慌，但

我坐在那里可以说静若松柏，眼睛死死地盯着浮子。他们只给了我玻璃珠大小的一块鱼饵，还说那就够我用了。我很长时间根本不敢给我的鱼钩换饵，因为每次我把线拉上来时，他们总会臭骂我弄的响动能把方圆五英里的鱼全吓跑了。

我想在那里待了肯定有两个钟头后，突然，我的浮子颤动了一下，我知道是条鱼弄动的，它肯定是碰巧路过，而且看到了我的鱼饵。如果真的是鱼咬钩，浮子动弹的样子错不了，跟不小心扯动鱼线时动的样子很不一样。接着，浮子又猛地动了一下，差不多要钻到水里，我再也忍不住了，向其他人吼了一嗓子：

“咬钩了！”

“扯淡！”锡德拉夫格鲁夫立即吼道。

但是马上，有鱼咬钩就是无可置疑的事。浮子直往下钻，我还能看到它就在水下，暗红色，另外感到手里的鱼竿也绷紧了。老天，那种感觉可真是的！鱼线被猛拉着绷紧了，那头是条鱼！其他人看到我的鱼竿弯了，扔下鱼竿就冲过来围到我身边。我用了吃奶大的劲才扯上来，那条鱼个大无比，闪着银光就飞上了天。同时我们全体痛苦地大叫一声，那条鱼脱钩了，落进岸下边的野薄荷丛里，可是落进浅水翻不了身，有一秒钟功夫，它躺在那里一点儿辙也没有。乔一下子冲进水里，溅了我们一身水，他用双手捉住了那条鱼。“逮住了！”他大叫道。接着，他把鱼一下子摔进草丛，我们全跪下来围着它看。我们可真是兴高采烈啊！那条快没命的可怜东西上下扑腾着，鳞片反射着彩虹般的光芒。那是一条巨大的鲤鱼，至少有六英寸长，重量绝对有四分之一磅。我们看着它嚷得可真起劲啊！后来却好像有片乌云罩上头顶。我们抬起头，看到布鲁厄老头就站在我们跟前。他戴着高毡帽——就是以前人们常戴的那种，介于大礼帽和圆顶礼帽之间——穿着牛皮高筒靴，手里拎了一根榛木粗棒子。

顿时，我们吓得像是头顶上出现了老鹰的一群斑鸠。他把我们挨个打量了一番。他的嘴巴又老又丑，牙全掉光了，加上因为剃了下巴上的胡须，让他看上去活像是个胡桃夹子。

“你们这些小子来这儿干吗？”他问道。

我们在干吗没什么好猜的，没人回答他。

“你们在我的池塘里钓鱼，我要你们好看！”他突然咆哮起来，马上就四面乱舞着棍子扑向我们。

“黑手党”顿作鸟兽散，鱼竿全不管了，还有那条鱼。布鲁厄老头追我们追过了半块草场。他的腿脚已经僵硬，所以跑不快，但在我们逃出他的击打范围前，还是结结实实挨了好几下。我们把他撇在地中间，他吼着说他知道我们每个人的名字，要去告诉我们的爸爸。我一直落在后边，所以棍击主要落在我身上。到我们跑到树篱的另一边时，我的小腿肚上留下了几道触目惊心的棍子印。

那天的其余时间里，我都是跟他们一帮在一起，他们还没有想好我到底算不算帮内人，但暂时还没有谁撵我走。那个跑腿的小子，不知道他编什么理由玩了一上午，到那时必须回啤酒厂。我们剩下的人走路走了很久，漫无目的，东张西望，就像大男孩一天不回家时那样闲逛，特别是在未得到允许的情况下。这是我平生头一次像个大男孩一样散步，跟以前凯蒂·西蒙斯领着我们散步很不一样。我们在镇边的一条干沟里吃了饭，沟里堆满了锈铁罐和野茴香。别的人分了些饭给我。锡德·拉夫格鲁夫有一便士，结果有人去买了个“便士大物件”，我们瓜分了它。天气很热，野薄荷味很刺鼻，“便士大物件”里的气让我们打起了嗝。吃完饭后，我们顺着那条白色土路游游荡荡走到了上宾菲尔德，我相信这是我平生第一次这样。我们还走进了山毛榉林子，地上铺了一层落叶，树皮平滑的树干直冲云霄，接近顶部树枝上的鸟雀看着就像小黑点。当时，在树林里想往哪里钻就能往哪里钻。宾菲尔德大屋关着门，那里不再养鹌鹑了，顶多会遇到有人赶着一车木头。树林里有棵锯倒的树，树干上的年轮看上去像是靶圈，我们就瞄着它扔石头。然后他们用弹弓打鸟，锡德·拉夫格鲁夫赌咒说他打中了一只苍头雁，掉在一个树杈上，可乔说他骗人，他们就争执起来，差点儿打架。后来，我们到了一个白垩坑，里面的地上铺了一层落叶。我们喊叫着听回音。有人喊了个脏字眼，然后我们把知道的脏字

眼全喊了出来。我被他们嘲笑，因为我知道的只有区区三个。锡德·拉夫格鲁夫声称知道小孩是怎么生出来的，据他说就跟兔子一个样，只不过小孩是从女人的肚脐眼生出来。哈里·巴恩斯开始往一颗山毛榉树上刻那个词，可是刚刻了头两个字母就烦了。后来我们绕着宾菲尔德大屋走了一圈。有传闻说里边一个池塘里有大鱼，可是谁都不敢进去，因为有荷吉斯老头，就是看小屋的人，他也算是看管整个地盘，他痛恨男孩。我们经过时，他正在房子旁边的菜地里挖地，我们隔着围栏向他挑衅，直到他把我们赶走。后来我们到了沃尔顿大路上向车夫挑衅，但总是待在树篱的这边，好躲过他们的鞭子。挨着沃尔顿大路，有个地方原先是采石坑，后来变成了垃圾场，最后黑莓灌木丛长得高过垃圾，那里有大堆大堆的锈铁罐、自行车架、有洞的菜盘子、蔓长着野草的烂瓶子等。我们在那里待了将近一个钟头。因为哈里·巴恩斯咬定说下宾菲尔德的铁匠收旧铁，一担40六分钱，结果我们用脚踢着找围栏用的铁桩，弄得从头到脚脏得不得了。乔在黑莓丛里找到一个刚搭的画眉窝，里面的小鸟翅膀上还没有长齐羽毛。在争论半天怎样处置后，我们把小鸟掏出来，先是用石头砸，然后用脚踩。小鸟是四只，我们每人分了一只踩。当时已经到了下午茶时间，我们知道布鲁厄老头说到做到，就等着挨一顿痛打吧，可是我们都太饿，再不回家就受不了。最后我们就溜回了家，但在回家的路上，又跟人吵了一架，那是在经过菜地时，我们看到一只老鼠就拎着棍子撵了起来。伯耐特老头是火车站站长，他每天傍晚都会侍弄那块菜地，并且很为之自豪。他火冒三丈地追赶我们，因为我们踩了他的洋葱苗圃。

我那天走的路有十英里，但是不累。一整天我都紧跟帮伙，他们干吗，我也都试着做一把。他们叫我“小孩”，而且使足劲笑话我，我多少保持了不折不挠的精神。但是我内心感觉非凡，那种感觉你没经历过，就不会了解——可如果你是个男的，早晚你会。我知道我不再是个小孩子，终于长成一个男孩，可以逛到大人找不到的地方，可以撵老鼠、踩死小鸟、扔石头、向车夫挑衅还有喊脏话等等。那是种冲天豪情，感觉无所不知、无所畏惧，而且总是无视规矩、杀这杀那的。白灰路，衣服上热汗津津的感觉，茴香和野薄荷的气味，脏字眼，垃圾堆的酸臭味，滋滋冒气的柠檬汽水和里面让人打嗝的气体，

踩死小鸟，鱼拽鱼线的感觉——凡此种种，都属于那种感觉。感谢上天我生为男儿，因为没有哪个女的会有这种感觉。

一点儿没错，布鲁厄老头跑了一圈，把我们都告发了。我爸沉着脸，从铺子里拿了根皮带，说要抽死乔的小命，但是乔挣扎着又嚷又踢，结果我爸只打中几下。不过第二天，文法学校的校长用藤条抽了他一顿。我也试过挣扎，可是我就那么点儿大，我妈一对膝盖就能挡住我，她用皮带狠抽了我一顿。结果那天我挨了三顿打，一次被乔打，一次被布鲁厄老头打，一次被我妈打。第二天，他们帮伙认为我还不能真正算是帮伙的一员，不管怎么样，我必须接受考验（他们是从印第安人故事里学到的这个词）。他们很严格地要求吞下虫子前，必须先把它咬断。不仅如此，因为我最小，他们很嫉妒只有我钓到了鱼。到后来，他们都企图把我钓到的鱼说得不算大。人们说起一条鱼时，一般趋势是它会变得越来越大，可是我钓到的那条被他们说得越来越小，直到后来，单听他们说，你会以为它根本就跟手指头差不多大呢。

可是没关系，我去钓过鱼了，我看到过鱼浮往水里猛钻，我感到鱼拽鱼线了，无论他们扯多少谎，这些他们都无法改变。

四

此后七年，从八岁到十五岁，关于这段期间，我记得的主要便是钓鱼。

别以为我别的什么都没干，只是在你回头看很久以前时，有些事情似乎膨胀了，直到大得掩盖住了其他一切。我离开荷莱特大妈的学校到文法学校上学，背上了皮书包，戴上了有黄色条纹的黑帽子，还有了第一辆自行车。此后又过了很久，我有了第一条长裤。我的第一辆自行车是那种一轮固定、一轮能转向的车型，当时很贵。骑下小山坡时，我把脚放在前车把上，让脚蹬嗖嗖地转着。在二十世纪初，这是典型的一景——一个男孩从小山上飘然驶下，头往后仰，脚伸到了空中。我对去文法学校上学心怀恐惧，颤抖不已，因为乔跟我说过校长威克斯老头（他的名字应是威克西）⁴¹让人心惊肉跳的一些事。

这个校长是个长得像凶神恶煞的小个子，一张脸长得跟狼脸一模一样。他在学校大教室的后面放了个玻璃箱，里面有几根藤条，他经常抽出来嗖嗖抡上一通，很吓人。但是让我吃惊的是，我的学习成绩很不错。我从来没想到过也许我比乔聪明。他比我大两岁，从他会走路起，就开始欺负我。实际上，乔是个不折不扣的笨学生，差不多每星期都要挨一次藤条，直到十六岁，他总是接近全校垫底的位置。第二学期，我在数学这科得了奖，还有个奖是在某些稀奇古怪的东西上，主要跟干花有关，科目名叫作科学。到我十四岁时，威斯克斯提到奖学金和上里丁⁴²大学的事。我爸那年头对乔和我仍然抱有很大期望，一心想让我去上公学⁴³。我时常听到的说法是我会当个老师，而乔会当个拍卖师。

但是我对学校的事所记不多。后来在打仗时，我曾和属于高等阶层的伙计混在一起。我吃惊地发现他们对公学经历过的噩梦般的操练一直忘不掉，要么因此一蹶不振，变得傻不愣登的，要么下半辈子都会跟那种痛苦的记忆做斗争，想把它忘掉。但是我们班上这一群店主和农场主的孩子们不会。我们上文法学校并在那里一直待到十六岁，不是为了别的，只是为了显示家里不穷。不过学校这种地方，主要还是让人盼着早点儿离开的地方。我没有那种得忠于母校的多愁善感，对那些灰色老石头也没什么傻乎乎的感情（一点儿没错，石头真的很老，那所学校是由红衣主教伍尔西出资修建的）。我们没有校友会，甚至没有校歌。下午不上课的时间都归自己支配，因为做游戏并不是非得参加，我们都能避则避。我们穿背带裤踢足球。尽管一般认为是打板球应该穿护腰，可我们穿着平时的衬衫和裤子打板球。我真正喜欢玩的，只有三柱门板球比赛，我们课间休息时经常在铺着石子的校园里玩，用的是板条箱的木板做成的球棒，还有打几天就完蛋的板球。

我现在还记得大教室里的气味：一种墨水、灰尘加靴子的气味。校园里有块当垫脚石用的石头，我们在上面磨小刀。学校对面的小面包店里卖一种切尔西小圆面包，比现在的切尔西小圆面包大了一倍，我们叫它“拉迪巴斯特”，价钱是半个便士。学校里别人做的事我一件也没落下。我把我的名字刻在课桌上，并因此挨了顿藤条——这种事

只要被逮到，总是要被抽一顿，但是刻下自己的名字可以说成了规矩。我曾把手指沾上墨水，咬指甲，用笔杆做飞镖，玩康克戏⁴⁴，传播黄色故事，学会了自慰，起哄语文老师布娄厄老头，还把小威利·塞米恩欺负得晕头转向。威利·塞米恩的爸爸是个承办丧事的，他有点儿傻不愣登，跟他说什么他都信。我们最喜欢玩的恶作剧就是要他去买一些不存在的东西，都是老一套——半份面值为二便士的邮票、橡皮锤子、左手用的螺丝刀，一罐条纹漆等，可怜的威利每次都信以为真。有天下午我们算是开够了心：我们把他放进一个桶里，叫他拎着提手把自己提起来。他最后进了精神病院，可怜的威利。但是只有放假，才真正过得有意思。

那年头还有些好玩的事情可做。冬天时，我们会去借一两只雪貂——我妈从来不允许乔和我在家里养，她称之为“恶心人的臭东西”——然后一个挨一个农场去问能不能让我们进田里捉老鼠。他们有时候让，有时候叫我们快滚蛋，还说我们比老鼠还要麻烦。到了深冬，人们用脱粒机打粮食时，我们会跟着机器帮忙把老鼠打死。有年冬天，肯定是一九〇八年，泰晤士河泛滥并上冻了，结果我们溜了几星期的冰，哈里·巴恩斯在冰上摔断了锁骨。早春，我们用灌了铅的木棍找松鼠打，后来是掏鸟窝。我们当时的理论是小鸟不会数数，只需要留下一只鸟蛋就行了，可那时的我们是残忍的小野人，有时我们干脆把鸟窝捅下来，然后把鸟蛋或者小鸟踩烂。癞蛤蟆产卵时，我们还有种玩法：逮到癞蛤蟆后，把自行车打气筒的气嘴塞进它屁股那头去打气，直到把它打爆为止。男孩就是那样，我也不知道是什么原因。夏天时，我们会骑自行车到伯福德坝上去洗澡。锡德·拉夫格鲁夫的堂弟沃利淹死是在一九〇六年，他被缠进水底的水草里，用拉钩把他捞上来后，他的脸色乌青。

然而什么都比不上钓鱼。我们去布鲁厄老头的池塘很多次，钓到过小鲤鱼和丁⁴⁵，有次还钓到一条吱吱叫的泥鳅。另外还有几个给牛饮水的池塘，星期六下午我们走路就能到。不过有了自行车后，我们开始去伯福德坝下面的泰晤士河里钓鱼，跟在饮牛池塘里钓鱼相比，好像更有长成大人的感觉，那里也没有农场主来赶我们，而且泰晤士河里有特大个的鱼——可是据我所知，没听说有谁钓上来过。

我对钓鱼感觉很奇怪——现在还有这种感觉，真的。我不能自称钓客，我这辈子还从来没钓到过二英尺长的鱼，而且有三十年时间，我再也没有握过鱼竿。然而我回头想起我八岁到十五岁这段时光时，好像都是围绕着去钓鱼的日子，每个细节都历历在目。我现在还记得每天钓鱼的日子，还有钓到的每一条鱼。要是我闭了眼睛去想，没有一个饮牛池塘或者回水处的样子我记不起来。我能写一本有关钓鱼技术的书。还是小孩时，我们用不起什么钓具，太贵了，而且我们一星期三个便士（是那年头我们的零花钱）的绝大部分都去买糖果和“拉迪巴斯特”了。很小的孩一般用弄弯的大头针当鱼钩钓鱼，因为钝，所以没多大用。把一根缝衣针放在蜡烛火上烧，然后用钳子弯好当鱼钩倒是很好用（当然没倒刺）。那些农场上的小伙子会用马鬃编线，几乎跟羊肠线一样好用。单用一根马鬃也能钓到小鱼。后来，我们有了两先令一根的鱼竿，甚至有了各种鱼线卷。天哪，我盯着华莱士铺子的橱窗里看可不是有多少个钟头！甚至那几把点四一〇口径的枪和娱乐用手枪也比不上钓具能让我兴奋。我捡到过一本加米奇公司的商品目录——我想应该是从垃圾堆里捡的，我几乎把它当《圣经》！甚至到现在，我还能告诉你所有关于羊肠线钓丝替代品、加固鱼线、利姆里克钓钩、木鱼槌、取钩器、诺丁汉鱼线的所有详细说明⁴⁶，还有天晓得多少其他技术细节。

然后就是我们用过的各种鱼饵。我们家的铺子里总是有足够的黄粉虫，用着不错，但还不是特别好。绿头大苍蝇的蛆更好，不过要向卖肉的格拉威特老头求上一求才能弄到。我们一伙经常是用抓阄或点兵点将的办法决定谁去开口，因为格拉威特对这种事向来一点儿也不随和。他是个脸上疙疙瘩瘩的大块头老家伙，说话声音就像看家猛狗一样，叫起来时——他经常那样对小孩叫——他的蓝色围裙上的刀啊铁器什么的叮当作响。被选中的人进去时，手里拿一个空的糖浆罐，四处晃悠着，一直等到顾客都走了，才低声下气地跟他说：

“求求你了，格拉威特先生，你这儿今天有没有蛆？”

通常他会咆哮起来：“什么？！蛆？我的铺子里会有蛆？几年没见过了，你以为我这儿养苍蝇？”

他那里当然有苍蝇，而且无处不在。他经常用一根头上绑块皮革的棍子对付它们，拿着伸到很远的地方，把苍蝇拍个稀巴烂。有时只能空着手走人，但是通常他会在你就要走时向你喊道：

“听着！你去后院看看，找得仔细的话，兴许能找到一两只。”

可是在那里，常常到处能找到一窝窝的蛆。格拉威特的后院闻起来像是战场，那年头卖肉的还没有冰箱。要是把蛆放在锯末里，存活时间会长一点儿。

黄蜂蛹不错，只是不容易穿上鱼钩，除非把蜂蛹先烤一下。谁要是发现一个黄蜂窝，我们会在夜里出去把松节油倒进去，然后用泥巴堵住洞口。第二天，黄蜂就会死光，然后就可以挖出蜂窝，把蜂蛹掏出来。有次出了岔子，不知道是松节油灌错洞还是怎么样，捣掉泥塞时，里面关了一晚上的黄蜂嗡的一声全飞了出来。我们被蜇得还不算厉害，只可惜旁边没有人拿秒表给我们掐一下时间。蚂蚱差不多是能找到的最好的鱼饵，特别是钓白鲑。钓鱼时把蚂蚱穿在鱼钩上，也不用鱼坠，只在水面上左点一下，右点一下——那称为“点水钓法”。但是只能逮到两三只蚂蚱。绿头大苍蝇也他妈难逮，那是钓鲑鱼的最佳鱼饵。特别在晴天时，要尽量把苍蝇活着穿上鱼钩，那样就会扭动。白鲑甚至吃黄蜂，不过把活黄蜂穿上鱼钩倒是个考验人的活。

天晓得另外还有多少种鱼饵。面包糊是用旧布裹着白面包，然后加水挤成，还有奶酪糊、蜂蜜糊，还有里面有茴香种子的面糊。煮过的麦粒钓鳊鱼不错，钓虾虎鱼用游丝蚯蚓很好，可以在陈年粪堆里找到。里面还能找到另外一种小蚯蚓，身上有条纹，气味像地蜈蚣一样，钓鲈鱼上佳。一般的蚯蚓钓鲈鱼也不错，但是一定要把蚯蚓放在苔藓里，可以保持新鲜不死，在土里保存就会死掉。牛粪上捉到的黄苍蝇钓鳊鱼很棒。据说有人用一颗樱桃就能钓到白鲑，我见过有人用圆面包里的葡萄干钓到一条斜齿鳊。

那年头，从六月十六（钓淡水鱼季节从那天开始）一直到仲冬，我的口袋里很少不带着装有虫子或者蛆的罐头瓶。为这件事，我跟我妈斗争过几次，最后她让步了，钓鱼不再属被禁止之列，我爸甚至在

一九〇三年作为圣诞节礼物，送了我一根值两先令的鱼竿。乔刚满十五岁就开始追女孩，打那以后就很少去钓鱼，他说那是小孩子玩的把戏，但是仍有其他五六个跟我一样，对钓鱼狂热。老天，钓鱼的日子可真带劲儿！在那些个又潮又热的下午，坐在大教室里，我趴在课桌上，听布娄厄老头尖着嗓子讲谓语、虚拟语气和关系从句什么的，可是我的全部心思，飞到了伯福德坝附近的回水处，那里有绿色的池塘，鲑鱼在里面游来游去。还有下午茶以后骑着自行车争分夺秒地先冲上查姆福特山，然后冲到河边，趁天还没黑钓一个钟头。那些宁静的夏日傍晚，坝上的轻轻溅水声，鱼上到水面时的清脆水花声，能把人活吃了的蠓虫，还有一群群鲑鱼绕着你的鱼钩游，可就是始终不咬钩。鱼在成群游着，看到黑脊背的鱼，我心里激动异常，盼望着，祈祷着（没错，真的在祈祷）其中哪一条会改变主意，在天还不太黑前咬住鱼饵。然后，总是“再钓五分钟”，接着是“顶多再钓五分钟”，直到只能推着自行车回到镇上，因为警察托尔勒在暗中巡查，被逮到没灯骑车，就会“吃罚”。有时在放暑假时，我们会带着煮鸡蛋、面包、黄油和一瓶柠檬水去钓上一整天，钓一会儿鱼，然后洗澡，然后再钓，有时候我们的确钓到鱼了呢。晚上回家时手全脏了，肚子饿得会把剩下的面包糊吃掉，还带回三四条裹在手帕里的鲑鱼，又腥又臭。我妈总是不肯用我带回家的鱼做菜。除了鳟鱼和鲑鱼，她认为河里的其他鱼都不能吃，称之为“恶心人的泥巴玩意儿”。我记得最清楚的，是没能钓到的鱼，特别是礼拜天下午沿着河边的拖船道走路时，经常能看到一些特大个的鱼，而手里刚好没拿鱼竿。礼拜天不让钓鱼，甚至泰晤士河管理委员会也不允许。礼拜天，我必须穿着厚厚的黑套装，戴着能把脖子锯掉的伊顿领子，去“好好散下步”。有个礼拜天，我在浅水里看到一条尖嘴梭鱼，一码长，正在那里睡觉，我差点儿用石头打中了它。有时候，在那些绿色池塘里靠近水草边的地方，会看到一条巨大的泰晤士鳟鱼从容游过。泰晤士河里的鳟鱼能长成特大的个儿，可事实上从来没人钓到过。听别人说，有个真正的泰晤士河钓客——就是那种长着酒糟鼻的老头，一年四季裹着外套，坐在轻便折凳上，带着二十英尺长用来钓斜齿鳊的鱼竿——说只要能钓到一条泰晤士河的鳟鱼，他情愿减一年阳寿。我不会怪他们无能，我现在完全明白他们的意思，而且比那时候还要明白。

当然也有别的事：我一年内长高三英寸，穿上了长裤，在学校得了几个奖，上坚信礼⁴⁷课，讲黄色故事，开始爱上读书，迷过养白鼠、木工细雕和集邮等，然而我记得的总是钓鱼。夏天的白昼，平坦的河边草地，远处的蓝色小山，回水处上方的柳树，其下的池塘有点儿像是深绿色玻璃。夏天的晚上，鱼儿打破水面，欧夜鹰在头顶盘旋，晚紫罗兰和拉塔基亚烟草的气味。你别误解我的意思，我并非想表达童年是有诗意的那种玩意儿，我知道那只是瞎扯淡而已。波提欧斯老先生（我的一个朋友，是位退休老师，以后我再详细说说他）在关于童年的诗意方面很博学。有时候他拿书念给我听，华兹华斯⁴⁸，露西·格雷，“曾几何时，草地树林”——诸如此类。不用说，他自己没有小孩。事实上无论从哪方面说，小孩都跟诗沾不上边，他们无非是野性十足的动物，但在自私程度上，却远远超过了动物。一个男孩不会对草地、果园什么的感兴趣。他从来不会看一眼风景，对花儿不屑一顾，对植物也是识这一样不认那一样，除非植物在某方面对他有影响，比如说好吃。杀生——这可能是男孩的生活里最接近诗的一面了。一天二十四个钟头，他们似乎有种与众不同的活力，投身于某些事情中的力量，好像长大成人后，就再也无法投身那些事了。还有面前的时间无穷无尽，以及不管你做什么，都可以永远不变做下去的感觉。

我是个长相难看的小男孩，黄油色头发，除了前额的一束，总是理得很短。我不会把我的童年理想化，跟许多人不一样，我一点儿也不想返老还童。我喜欢过的东西绝大多数现在我只会毫无兴趣。就算我再也看不到板球，也不会有什么所谓。如果有一担糖果，我也绝对不会有什么欣喜感。但对钓鱼，我仍然有，而且总是有那种独特的感觉。没说的，你会觉得这真他妈傻，可是甚至到现在，我的确还有一点幻想能再去钓鱼，而现在的我是个胖子，四十五岁，两个孩子，有幢位于郊区的房子。为什么？因为说起来，我的确还对童年有点儿多愁善感——不单是对我自己的童年，而且是对我自己在其中成长起来的那种世事氛围，我想现在也即将一去不复返，而钓鱼不知怎么，成了那种世事氛围的典型代表。一想到钓鱼，就想到不属于现代社会的一些东西。想着能在柳树下，在宁静的池塘边坐上一整天——而且那种

可以坐在旁边的宁静池塘能够找到——这种想法本身就属于战前，有收音机前，有飞机以前，有希特勒之前的。甚至那些英格兰淡水鱼的名字也有种平和的味道：斜齿鳊，红眼鱼，鲮鱼，鲃鱼，鲃鱼，鲃鱼，尖嘴梭鱼，白鲑，鲤鱼，丁等等，这些都是实有所指的名字，想出这些名字的人没听说过机关枪，没有生活在害怕被炒鱿鱼的恐惧中，或是把时间都花在吞阿司匹林上，或是去看电影，想着怎样才能躲开集中营。

我怀疑现在还有人钓鱼吗？伦敦方圆一百英里内的任何地方都无鱼可钓。运河边上，有那么几间死气沉沉的钓鱼俱乐部，一间挨一间。百万富翁在苏格兰旅馆旁的私有水域里钓鳟鱼。用人造假苍蝇钓人工养鱼，那有点儿自命不凡的味道。可是谁还能在磨坊外的水道里，或是护城河，或是饮牛池塘里钓到鱼？英格兰的淡水鱼都到哪里去了？我还是个小孩子时，每个池塘、每条溪流里都有鱼。如今，所有池塘都没了水，小溪不是被工厂里排出的化学品毒化，就是扔满了锈铁罐和摩托车轮胎。

关于钓鱼，我记得最清楚的是我从未钓到的鱼，我想这很正常。

差不多在我十四岁时，我爸给荷吉斯老头做了一件好事，他是宾菲尔德大屋的看管人。什么好事我忘了——好像是给了他一点儿药，治好了他的家禽的寄生虫病，要么是别的。荷吉斯是个脾气暴躁的老头，但他知恩图报。此后不久有一天，他到铺里买喂鸡谷时，在门外碰到我，就用他那种粗鲁的方式拦住我。他的脸像是用一块树根刻出来的，牙掉得只剩下两颗，黑褐色，还很长。

“嗨，小伙子！你钓鱼，是吧？”

“是。”

“想着你也是。听着，你要是想，可以把你的钓鱼家伙带着，到山后面的池塘里试试。里面有很多鳊鱼和小梭鱼。我说的，你可别跟别人说，来的时候也别带别的小崽子，要不我会抽烂他们的背。”

说完，他就背着那袋喂鸡谷一拐一拐地走了，好像觉得自己已经说得太多。第二个礼拜天，我装了满满一口袋虫子和蛆，骑自行车去了宾菲尔德大屋，去小屋找荷吉斯老头。到那时，宾菲尔德大屋已经空了十几二十年，它的主人法莱尔先生受不了住在那里，也没有或者不愿意把它出租。他靠农场的交租住在伦敦，而房子和这一片地方都撒手不管。所有围栏都变成了绿色，正在腐烂，庭园里长满荨麻，种植园里的东西长得像是丛林。甚至花园也变回了草地，只有几处长得歪歪扭扭的玫瑰花丛说明花圃以前的位置。那座房子却漂亮得很，特别从远处看。它是座有柱廊和竖长窗户的白色大屋，我想建于安妮女王⁴⁹在位时，建造的人应该去过意大利。要是我现在还能去，大概有点儿兴趣在一片荒烟野草中走一走，想着那里曾经的生活场景，还有建造的人，他们之所以建了这种地方，是因为他们幻想好日子永远过不完。我还是个小孩子时，却不曾多看一眼大屋或那个地方。我终于找到荷吉斯老头，问了去池塘的方向。他刚吃完饭，还有点儿暴躁。那个池塘在大屋后面，大约有几百码远，完全隐藏在山毛榉树林中，可它是个很大的池塘，几乎是个湖，差不多有一百码长，五十码阔。它令人震惊，即使我才那么小，即使我还在那个年纪，就已经感到震惊了，震惊的是发现在离里丁十二英里，离伦敦也不超过五十英里的地方，竟有这么一个与世隔绝的地方。独自一人在那地方的感觉，就算身处亚马逊河畔也不过如此。那个池塘被巨大的山毛榉树围了一圈，有段地方树长得靠近水边，在水中映出倒影。树林的另一边是片草地，中间有块凹地，长着一丛丛野薄荷。池塘的一处尽头有间木船屋，正在灯芯草中腐烂着。

池塘里有很多鳊鱼，不大，差不多四到六英寸长。时不时能看到其中有一条半翻转身子，在水面下闪着光，颜色是有点儿泛红的棕色。里面也有些尖嘴梭鱼，而且肯定是大梭鱼。我从来没看到过，但是有时候，会有那么一条正在水草里晒太阳时，转过身像块砖头一样，啪的一声蹿进水里。想钓到是妄想，可是不用说，我每次去那里时都会试试。我试过用在泰晤士河里钓到的鲮鱼和小鲤鱼做饵——平时这些鱼放在果酱瓶里养着。我甚至试过用小片铁皮做的旋式鱼饵⁵⁰，可那些梭鱼已经吃鱼吃饱了，所以不会咬钩，反正就算会，也会

把我的不管什么钓具都扯断。每次从那个池塘回来，我总是能钓到至少十几条小鳊鱼。有时在放暑假时，我会去那里待上一整天，带着鱼竿和《好伙伴》或者《英国旗》什么的，我妈给我准备了裹在一起的一大块面包和奶酪。我钓了几个钟头后，会躺在草地上的凹处看《英国旗》。后来，面包糊的气味和某处的鱼跳声又会让我变得激动欲狂，就再回到水边钓一阵子。如此这般，夏天的一天就过去了。但最棒的，是可以一个人独处，完全独处，尽管离大路才不过几百米远。我那时已经刚好到了那种岁数，知道偶尔一个人独处也不错。周围全是树，感觉好像这个池塘是我一个人的，除了水里鱼的动静和头顶飞过的鸽子，没有什么干扰。但是，在去那里钓鱼的两年间，我不知道有多少次真的去成了，不会超过十几次。从家里去那里有三英里，最少要搭上整个下午。有时候是因为别的事，有时候想去却下雨了。你也知道，世事无常啊。

有天下午，鱼不咬钩，我开始去离宾菲尔德大屋最远的池塘那端探上一探。池塘里的水有点儿溢出来，变成了沼泽地，要想过去，还得在黑莓灌木丛和从树上掉下来的烂树枝里闯出一条路。我费了老大的劲走了差不多五十码，突然，我到了一片开阔地，看到了另一个池塘，之前我从来不知道有这么一个池塘。它是个小池塘，不超过二十码宽，因为上面垂着树枝，水的颜色很深。然而很清澈，深不可测，往下能看十到十五英尺深。我来回转悠了一会儿，像男孩通常会做的那样，因为闻着潮湿和腐烂的沼泽气味而感到心旷神怡。就在那时，我看到一样东西，让我几乎跳了起来。

那是一条个大无比的鱼，我说它个大无比，可不是夸张。它几乎像我的胳膊那样长，它在深深的水下横游过池塘，然后成了个黑影，消失在那边更黑的水里。我感觉仿佛有一柄利剑刺穿了我的身体。它比我以前见过的最大的鱼——不论死活——还要大得多。我屏着气站在那里。过了一会儿，又有一条体粗个大的鱼从水里游过，然后又是一条，然后又是贴得很近的两条，整个池塘里全是。我想是鲤鱼，有可能是鳊鱼或者丁，但更有可能是鲤鱼，鳊鱼或丁长不到那么大的个儿。我明白了是怎么回事：有段时间，这个池塘跟那个是连在一起的，然后连接的溪流干掉了，树木把这个池塘围了起来，就这样，它

被忘掉了。这种事情偶尔会发生，某个池塘不知怎么就被忘掉，几年几十年过去了，从来没人在里面钓过鱼，鱼就长成了不一般的大个儿。我看到的那些大家伙可能有一百岁了，除了我，这世界上再无人知道它们在那里。极有可能有二十年了，从来没谁像我这样往池塘里细看，很可能就连荷吉斯老头和法莱尔先生的管家也忘了有这么一个池塘。

唉，你能想象到我的感觉。过了一会儿，单单是看着，已经把我勾引得受不了了。我赶紧跑回原来那个池塘边，把我钓鱼的东西全收拾起来，用这些去钓那些大家伙是没用的，会被它们像扯头发丝一样扯断，可是我不能再钓那些微不足道的小鱼了。看到那条大鲤鱼，让我胃里有了种感觉，像要呕吐似的。我骑上自行车，一溜烟下山回家。对一个男孩儿来说，这是个极其美妙的秘密。那里有个深色池塘隐藏在树林里，个头特大的鱼在里面畅游——那些鱼从来没被钓过，会一口吞上为它们送上的第一个诱饵，问题只是得用能拉上来的结实鱼线。我已经全计划好了。哪怕从铺子的放钱抽屉里偷钱，我也要去买一套能钓它们的钓具。不管怎么样，天晓得会怎样做，我会拿半克朗⁵¹去买钓鲑鱼的丝制鱼线，还有粗羊肠线或是加固鱼线和五号鱼钩，然后再去，带着奶酪、蛆、面包糊、黄粉虫、小蚯蚓、蚂蚱，还有其他每种鲤鱼会注意但是能要它命的诱饵。就在下个礼拜天，我会再去试试钓几条上来。

但是到头来，我从来没有回去过，没有人真的能回去。我从来没有从抽屉里偷钱或者买了钓鲑鱼的线，或是试着去钓那些鲤鱼。几乎紧接着那时候，冒出来一些事情，让我无法按计划去做。如果冒出来的不是这件事，也会有别的。世事无常啊。

我当然知道，你会想着那些鱼的个头是我夸张出来的，很可能觉得那不过是一般个头的鱼（就说是一英尺长的吧），却在我的记忆里越长越大。不是这样的，人们会就他钓到的鱼说谎，对钓到又脱了钩的鱼更是如此，可是我从未钓到过其中一条，甚至没试过，我没有说谎的动机呀。我跟你讲，它们真的是个大无比。

钓鱼！

在这里，我要坦白一件事，要么两件吧。其一，回头看我这辈子时，说老实话，没有任何一件事能像钓鱼一样，让我心花怒放，其他任何事跟它相比，都有些黯然失色。我不是想把自己说成对女人不感兴趣的那种男人，我也花过不少时间追女人，就算到现在，有机会我还是会去追。但是，如果让我在得到一个女人——我指的是任何一个女人——和钓到一条十磅重的鲤鱼之间选择，我肯定每次都会选鲤鱼。另外我要坦白的是，从十六岁起，我就再也没有钓过鱼。

为什么？因为世事难料啊，因为在我们所过的日子里——我说的不是普遍意义上的日子，而是在这个时代、在这个国家所过的日子里——我们不能想做什么就做什么，倒不是因为我们总在干活，即便是农场干活的或者犹太裁缝，也并不总是在干活，而是因为在我们体内，有种魔怪把我们驱来赶去，永远不停地去做愚蠢的事。做什么都有时间，就是没时间去做得值得一做的事情。想一样你真心喜欢做的事吧，再把你这辈子的确花到上面的零碎时间一个个钟头加起来，然后计算一下，看看你花在修面、来回坐公共汽车、在火车换乘处等车、交流黄色故事、看报纸之类上的时间有多少吧。

十六岁后，我再也没去钓过鱼，好像总是没时间。我在干活，我在追女孩儿，我穿上了我的第一双带扣的靴子，戴上了第一副高领圈（要戴上一九〇九年时的那种领圈，你的脖子得像长颈鹿的那样长），我在上推销员和会计课程的函授课以“长知识”。那些大鱼在宾菲尔德大屋后面的池塘里畅游，除了我没人知道，它们保存在我的记忆里。某天，也许是个银行休息日，我会再去那里钓它们。但是我从来没回去过，除了这个，干别的什么都有时间。很奇怪的是，从那时到现在，我唯一一次差点儿去钓成鱼，还是在打仗期间。

那是在一九一六年的秋天，就在我受伤前不久，我们从战壕里出来到了前线后面的一个村子里。虽然才九月份，可我们从头到脚全是泥巴。跟往常一样，我们不清楚要在那里待多久，之后又开往哪里。

幸运的是，我们的指挥官身体有些不舒服，得了支气管炎什么的，他懒得赶着我们进行日常操练、着装检查、踢足球等等，据说这些活动能在远离前线时让部队保持士气。头一天，我们在谷仓里住，一整天懒懒散散地躺在里面的糠包堆上，一边把绑腿上的泥巴剔掉。到了晚上，有几个伙计开始去村边一座房子那里排队，光顾在里头做生意的两个很是不堪的婊子。那天早上，虽然离开村子属违反军令，但我还是成功地溜出来，在从前是田地如今却满目荒凉的地方转了转。那天早晨又潮又湿，有点儿像是冬天。不用说，周围全是打仗留下的残片破物，乱糟糟的，污秽不堪，比遍布尸体的战场还糟糕，有折断树枝的树木、填了一半的旧弹坑、罐头瓶、粪块、泥巴、野草，还有其间野草丛生的一团团带刺铁丝网等等。你也知道离开前线时的感觉。关节僵硬，心里有点儿空荡荡的，不会再对任何事情感兴趣。部分是恐惧和疲惫，但主要是厌倦。当时，谁都以为战争绝对会没完没了地打下去。今天、明天或者后天，你会再赴前线，可能到了下星期，一发炮弹就会把你打成肉酱，但即使那样，也比没完没了的战争厌倦感要强。

我溜达到一道树篱边时，碰到了我们连的一个伙计，我忘了他姓什么，只记得他外号叫诺比。他长得有点儿像是吉卜赛人，皮肤黝黑，低头垂肩，他那模样就算穿上军装，也能给人以他好像怀里揣了两只偷来的兔子的印象。他以前是个小贩，是个真正的伦敦佬，不过是那种部分要靠在肯特郡和埃塞克斯郡摘啤酒花、捉鸟、偷猎和偷水果等过日子的伦敦佬。他一看到我，就跟我点头打招呼，他说话时，有种鬼鬼祟祟、不安好心的样子：

“喂，乔治！”（那些伙计仍叫我乔治——当时我还没长胖）“乔治！你看见地那头的杨树林吗？”

“看见了。”

“哎，树那边有个池塘，里面全他妈是鱼。”

“鱼？去你的！”

“我跟你说，里面他妈的全是鱼，鲈鱼，跟我以前逮到过的鱼一样棒。要不你自己去看看吧。”

我们一起艰难地走过那片泥巴地，一点儿没错，诺比说对了。杨树林那边，有个看上去不干净的池塘，是沙岸。显然，它原来是个采石坑，后来积满了水，里面长满了鲈鱼。就在水面下，能看到它们带条纹的背部，正在水中畅游，有几条肯定有一磅重。我想在打仗的两年里，它们没有受到干扰，有足够时间生长繁殖。你大概想象不出看到那些鲈鱼对我产生的作用，就好像突然让我还了魂。不用说，我们俩的脑子里只有一个念头——怎样找到鱼竿和鱼线。

“老天！”我说，“我们要钓它几条。”

“我们操他妈的肯定要。走吧，我们回村子里找些钓鱼的家伙。”

“好吧。可是最好小心点儿，让中士知道，我们就吃不了兜着走了。”

“噢，操他妈的中士。他们想把我吊死、淹死还是大卸八块，随便，我他妈一定要钓它几条。”

你不会知道我们想去钓那些鱼到了何等狂热的程度，你打过仗的话也许会。你知道那种能把人逼疯的战争厌倦感，还有几乎不管什么乐子都会紧抓不放的样子。我就看到过两个伙计在掩体里打架打得不可开交，就为了半份三便士一份的杂志。但不仅是这个，还有想从战争气氛中逃离的想法，可能有一整天，能够坐在杨树下钓鲈鱼，离开连队，离开噪音和臭味，还有军服、军官、敬礼和中士的声音！钓鱼是战争的反面，但是能不能干成，还一点儿谱都没有，不过只是想到，就让我们有点儿兴奋不已。让中士发现的话，百分之百会禁止我们去，换了别的军官也会，然而最糟糕的，是不知道我们还得在村子里驻扎到什么时候。我们可能驻扎一星期，也可能在两个钟头内开路。同时，我们什么钓具也没有，甚至没有大头针或者一段线头，我们得从头干起。可那个池塘里全是鱼！首先要找到鱼竿，柳树枝最好，然而不用说，放眼看去，周围一棵柳树也没有。诺比爬上一棵杨

树，砍下一根小树枝，说不上很好用，但好过什么也没有。他用折刀把它削得终于看上去还像是根鱼竿。我们把它藏进岸边的野草里，然后偷偷溜回村子，没人看到我们。

第二件事是找根针做鱼钩，可是谁都没有。有个伙计有几根织补针，但是太粗，而且针尖钝。因为担心中士会听到风声，我们不敢让任何人知道我们找针是干吗用的。最后我们想到了村边那两个婊子，她们肯定有针。我们到那里时——得穿过乱糟糟的院子到后门那里——屋子关了门，两个婊子在睡觉，不用说，她们辛苦得也该休息了。我们又跺脚又嚷叫又打门，差不多过了十分钟，一个又胖又丑的女人裹着衣服出来了，嘴里还用法语向我们尖声吵着，诺比也向她嚷道：

“针！针！你有针吗？”

当然，她不知道他在说什么，接着诺比试着说半吊子英语，想着她作为外国人会听明白：

“想要，针！缝衣针！像这个！”

他的手势意在表达缝衣的动作，可是那个婊子误会了，把门打开一点儿让我们进去。不过最后我们还是让她明白了，从她那里讨到一根针。到那时，已是吃饭时候。

吃过饭，中士到谷仓里转了一圈，当时我们正在那里忙着找人替我俩值一次劳动班，我们钻到一堆糠包下面，刚好躲过了他。他走后，我们点着一根蜡烛，把那根针烧红后弯得有了点儿鱼钩的样子。我们除了折刀没有别的工具，结果我们都把手指烧得够戗。然后是鱼线。除了粗线谁都没有别的什么线，但是最后我们认识了一个伙计，他有一卷缝衣线。可他不想放手，结果我们只得给他一整盒烟卷才换到。线太细了，诺比把它割成三段绑到一根钉子上，然后仔细地编成一根。与此同时，我找遍整个村子，才找到一块软木瓶塞，我把它剖成两半，然后用一根火柴穿过去，这样就做成一个鱼浮。到那时已经是晚上，天正在黑下来。

基本的东西我们都有了，再有点儿羊肠线就更好了。一开始好像没多少希望能找到，后来我们想到了医院的护理员，医用羊肠线不属于他的装备，不过他可能有一些。一点儿没错，我们问了他，发现他的帆布背包里有一大卷医用羊肠线，是他有先见之明地在医院或者别的地方偷的。我们又拿一盒烟卷跟他换了十段羊肠线。那是种发朽的脆玩意儿，都是差不多六英寸长的小段。天黑后，诺比把羊肠线浸透水，直到变软后再一段段接起来。现在，我们全有了——钩、竿、线、浮子和羊肠线。我们随便在哪里都能挖到蚯蚓。那个池塘里全是鱼！带条纹的大鲈鱼吱吱叫着要我们去钓！我们躺下睡觉时仍兴奋不已，连靴子都没脱。明天！明天要是能去就好了！但愿战争把我们忘了，只要一天就行！我们下定决心，只等点过名就马上开溜，一天不回来，即使回来后会因此受到最严厉的战场惩罚，也在所不惜！

唉，我想后来的事你能猜到。点名时，命令下来了，我们要收拾起所有装备，准备在二十分钟后开拔。我们顺着大路行军九英里，然后上了卡车，被运到前线的另外一处。至于那个杨树下面的池塘，我从来没有再次看到或听说过，我想它后来会被芥子气毒化。

自那以后，我从来没钓过鱼，好像总是没机会。那之后，是等待战争结束，像所有别的人一样拼命找工作，然后我找了份工作，工作也找到了我。我是一间保险公司里前程远大的年轻人——那种积极的商界年轻人，年富力强，前程似锦，这是在克拉克大学招生广告上读到的——然后我就是那种常见的遭人践踏、一星期挣五镑的人，在远近郊有座半独立的花园住宅。这种人是不去钓鱼的，就像股票经纪人不会去采摘报春花一样，那是不合适的行为，提供给他们的，另有其他种类的娱乐。

当然，每年夏天我都有两周假期，你也知道那种假期，在马吉特、雅莫斯、伊斯特本、哈斯廷、伯尼马尔斯、布赖顿⁵²等地度过，每年都稍微不同，视公司的业绩而定。跟希尔达这种女人在一起，假期的主要特点，就是没完没了在心里合计包膳食的旅馆老板又骗了我们多少钱，还有告诉孩子们不行，他们不能买新沙桶。没几年前，我们去了伯尼马尔斯。有个晴天的下午，我们沿着码头闲逛，它差不多

有半英里长，一路上都有些伙计在钓鱼，拿的是在海里钓鱼用的又短又粗的鱼竿，竿头有几个小铃铛，他们的鱼线则往海里放了有五十码长。这种钓法有点儿闷人，他们谁也没钓到鱼，但仍然在钓。孩子们很快就烦了，吵着要回海滩。希尔达看到有个伙计在往钩上穿海蚯蚓，她说那让她感到恶心，可我还是多逗留了一会儿，走过来走过去。突然，有个铃铛响声大作，一个伙计在绞着收鱼线，人人都停下来看。一点儿没错，湿鱼线、铅坠拉上来了，线那头是条很大的比目鱼⁵³（我想是条鲆鱼）在挣来扭去。那个伙计把它摔在码头上的木板上，它上下扑腾，湿漉漉的，闪着光，背是灰色而且疙疙瘩瘩的，白肚子，还有那种海的新鲜咸味。我内心里好像不知怎么被触动了。

我们走开时，我随随便便说了一句，只是为了试试希尔达的反应：

“我有点儿想趁我们在这儿，也去钓一下鱼。”

“什么！你去钓鱼，乔治？可是你根本不会钓，你会吗？”

“噢，我以前可是很拿手呢。”我告诉她。

她照常隐隐约约不赞成，不过也没有想得太多，只是说我去钓鱼的话，她不会跟我一起去看我把那些恶心人的又湿又软的玩意儿穿上鱼钩。然后突然，她想到我去钓鱼的话，就得买些装备，也就是鱼竿、鱼线什么的，要花上差不多一镑钱，单是鱼竿，就要花十先令。一转眼，她就发脾气了，你是没见过希尔达这人听到要浪费十个先令时的反应啊。她气势汹汹地就来了：

“浪费钱买那种玩意儿！荒唐！那样又破又短的东西他们竟敢卖十先令！真不要脸。你这把年纪，还钓鱼呢！就凭你这么一个大三粗的男人。别那么小孩气了，乔治。”

然后孩子们来劲了。劳娜鬼鬼祟祟地挨到我跟前，以她那种愚蠢加没礼貌的方式问我：“你是小孩吗，爸爸？”小比利当时话还说不利落呢，就总结性地向全世界宣布：“啪啪是个小孩。”突然，他们俩

围着我跳起了舞，边敲打沙桶边唱：

“啪啪是个小孩！啪啪是个小孩！”

没老没少的小杂种！

六

除了钓鱼，还有看书。

如果我给你造成了这种印象，以为除了钓鱼，别的我什么都不爱干，那就是我夸大其词了。钓鱼当然排第一位，可读书稳稳排在第二位。我开始读书时，我是说自觉读书，肯定有十或十一岁了。在那个岁数开始读书，就像发现了一个全新的世界。甚至到现在，我仍然看书看得很多。事实上几星期下来，我都会看完几本书。我就是那种你可以称为有代表性的布茨图书馆读者。我总是对时下的畅销书一见钟情（《好伙伴》《孟加拉枪骑兵》《哈特城堡》——我对每本都看得入迷），加入左派读书会也有一年多了。一九一八年，二十五岁时，我读了些乱七八糟的书，对我的观念有了些影响。可什么都不能跟头几年相比，当时突然间，我发现打开一份售价一便士的周报，便能一跃而入盗贼的厨房，还有中国的鸦片馆、波利尼西亚的岛屿和巴西的森林。

我从十一岁到差不多十六岁这段时间读书的瘾最大。一开始看的，总是给男孩看的周刊——薄薄的小开本，印刷很差，封面是三色印刷——后来没多久就是书本。《福尔摩斯探案集》《尼科拉博士》《铁海盜》《德拉库拉》《抽彩》等。还有耐特·格尔德、恩杰·高尔以及另外一个忘了叫什么名字的人写的东西，那个忘了叫什么的人写拳击小说跟耐特·格尔德写赛跑小说一样手快。我想要是我爸妈的文化程度稍微高一些，他们就会填鸭式地让我读一些“好”书，比如狄更斯、萨克雷等人的，事实上，学校里也的确强迫我们读《昆丁·杜沃德》⁵⁴，伊齐其尔叔叔有时也鼓励我读拉斯金⁵⁵和卡莱尔的书。可是我们家里几乎没有一本书，我爸一辈子除了《圣经》和斯迈尔斯⁵⁶的《自助》，别的书没读过一本。直到很久以后，我才开始读第一

本“好”书。读书虽然是这样，但我不后悔。我读得随心所欲，我从那些书里学到的，比从学校教给我们的东西中学到的更多。

那种一便士一本的惊险小说在我小时候已经越来越少，我也几乎忘得差不多了，可是另外还有一系列给男孩子读的每周期的读物，其中有些至今还出。水牛比尔的故事我觉得现在是没影了，耐特·格尔德写的东西也不再有人读，可是尼克·卡特系列以及塞克斯顿·布雷克侦探系列好像跟以前一样受欢迎。《宝石》和《磁铁》，如果我记得不错，是开始于一九〇五年左右。《B.O.P.》当时还很火，可是《好朋友》精彩无比，我想这本杂志肯定是一九〇三年前后开始有的。还有一套百科全书——我忘了准确书名叫什么——分成很多本，每本一便士。那套书好像从来都是买着划不来，学校里有个男生经常把旧书送人。如果我现在还知道密西西比河的长度或者章鱼跟墨鱼的区别，或者说得准青铜的成分，就是从那套百科全书上学到的。

乔从来不读书，他属于上了几年学，学到最后还是一口气读不下十行字的那种学生。他看到印刷字就不舒服。我看到过他有次拿起我的一本《好朋友》看了一两段转身就走，举动中带着厌恶的样子，跟一匹马闻到不新鲜的草料时一个样。他试过让我别再读书，可是我爸妈已经认定我“脑袋更管用”而支持了我。他们很为我自豪，因为按照他们的说法，我表现出了“学书本”的兴趣。但是他们在看到我读《好朋友》和《英国旗》之类的书时，经常会隐隐约约不大开心，他们认为我应该读一些“让人长进”的书，可他们所知有限，也不知道什么书“让人长进”。最后我妈找来一本福克斯⁵⁷写的《殉教者书》，我没看，不过里面的插图还不算太差。

一九〇五年整个冬天，我每星期都花一便士买份《好朋友》，我一期不漏地看连载小说《无畏者多诺文》。无畏者多诺文是个探险者，受雇于一个美国的百万富翁，到世界上的角角落落去寻找千奇百怪的东西。有时是到非洲的火山口寻找金球那样大的钻石，有时到西伯利亚寻找猛犸象牙化石，有时到秘鲁湮没的城市里寻找印加人的宝藏。多诺文每星期开始一趟新的历险，每次都很顺利。我最喜欢待的地方，是院子后面的阁楼。除了我爸去新拿一袋谷物时，那是家里

最安静的地方，有很大的袋子可以躺在上面。里面有种灰泥和豆料的混合气味，墙角都有蜘蛛网。就在我经常躺的地方，高处屋顶上有个洞，有根板条从灰泥里往外戳着。我现在还能体会到那种感觉。有次是在冬天，躺着刚好不冷，我趴在那里，打开一本《好朋友》放在面前。有只耗子沿着袋子边往上爬，像个上了发条的玩具。突然，它停下来一动不动，用黑玉般的眼睛看着我。我当时十二岁，可我是无畏者多诺文，在离河口两千英里的亚马逊河上，我刚刚撑起了帐篷，那种一百年才开一次花的神秘兰花的根就安然放在我帐篷里的床底下。森林里到处是霍比族印第安人，正在敲打战鼓。他们这族人把牙齿涂成猩红色，而且会活剥白种人的皮。我看着耗子，耗子也看着我。我闻得到灰尘、豆料还有灰泥冰冷的气味，而我身处亚马逊。这是种无上幸福，纯粹的无上幸福。

七

就这些了，真的。

我试着跟你说了下战前的世界如何，那是在看到海报上佐格国王的名字时想到的。有可能我什么也没告诉你，要么你对战前有印象，用不着别人讲给你听；要么你没印象，跟你讲了也白讲。到此为止，我只说了我在十六岁之前遇到的事，到那时为止，家里的事一切顺利。我十六岁生日前不久，开始对人们所说的“真实生活”略识一二，“真实生活”，就意味着逆人心意。

我看到宾菲尔德大屋那边的大鲤鱼之后第三天左右，我爸进屋用下午茶时，一副忧心忡忡的样子，脸色比平时还苍白几分，身上粘的磨粉更多。他在整个茶点时间都很严肃地吃东西，不怎么说话。那段时间，他吃东西时很专心，因为他的后牙没剩几颗了，他的胡子总在斜着上下动。我正要从桌前起身，他又要我坐下。

“等一下，乔治，我的孩子，我有话要跟你说说，再坐一会儿吧。孩子他妈，我要说啥昨晚你也听过了。”

我妈面前是那把褐色大茶壶，她的手交叉着放在腿上，脸色阴

沉。我爸开始说话了，语气很严肃，但是因为要对付卡在后牙里的面包屑，效果打了不少折扣。

“乔治，我的孩子，有几件事我要跟你说说。我想了有一阵子，那就是你不该上学了，恐怕你现在就得开始干活，开始多少挣点儿钱拿回来给你妈。昨天晚上我给威克西先生写了封信，告诉他我得让你退学了。”

当然，这也算有例可循——我是说他在跟我说之前，就写信给威克西先生，那时代的父母如此行事可以说理所当然，总是不跟孩子商量，就为他们决定一切。

我爸继续嘟嘟囔囔地说着，忧心忡忡地解释。他“最近过得艰难”，什么事“都有点儿不顺”，结果是我和乔只能开始挣钱养活自己了。当时，我既不知道，也不怎么关心生意真的是好还是坏。而且我根本没多少商业头脑，看不出怎么会“不顺”。事实上，我爸受到了竞争的冲击。撒拉辛斯，一个在全国都有分号的大种子零售商，那时来到下宾菲尔德插了一脚。半年前，他们在市场那里租了间铺面并装修一番，用的是鲜绿色油漆、镀金字，还有漆成红色的园艺工具和香豌豆的巨大广告，隔着一百码就扑入眼帘。撒拉辛斯除了卖花种子，还自称是“家禽家畜饲料全面供应商”。除了麦子和燕麦之类，他们也卖混合家禽饲料专利产品，装在花里胡哨袋子里的喂鸟种子、多种形状和颜色的狗粮、药品、外用药剂、饲料添加剂等等，另外还有老鼠夹、拴狗链子、孵化器、卫生球、捕鸟网、灯泡、除草剂、杀虫剂等等，甚至有些分号还有“家畜部”，卖兔子和只有一天大的小鸡。我们那间到处灰扑扑的老铺子，再加上我爸拒绝进新种类的货品，让他无力跟撒拉辛斯竞争，不过他也不愿去竞争。养有拉货车马匹的买卖商和跟种子零售商打交道的农场主抵制撒拉辛斯，但过了半年，撒拉辛斯已经争取到附近的少数几家上等人，那年头他们还有马车或是轻便马车，所以养有马匹。这对于我爸和另外一个谷物商威克尔来说，意味着生意丢了一大块。当时我对那些完全不理解，我的态度是男孩子会有的那种。在那之前，我从来没有对做生意感兴趣过，也从来或者说几乎没有在铺子里招呼过顾客。偶尔，我爸想叫我跑个腿或是帮把

手，例如把一袋袋谷物拖上或拉下垛时，我总是能躲则躲。我们班上的男生完全不像公学里的男生，懂得该干活时就得干活，干活才能挣到钱。但是，一个男孩认为父亲的生意对他来说是件很烦人的事，这也属正常。直到那时，对我来说，钓鱼竿、自行车、嗞嗞冒气的柠檬水等等，比成人世界里的任何事情都要亲切得多。

我爸已经跟杂货商格里梅特老头说过，他想找个机灵的小伙子，也愿意马上把我招进去。同时，我爸要辞掉铺里跑腿的，乔要回到铺子里帮忙，直到他找到稳定的活计为止。乔离开学校已经有段时间了，从那时起，差不多一直在闲逛。我爸有时候说过“把他弄进”啤酒厂的会计部门，早些时候甚至想过让他去当个拍卖师，但这两样都完全没戏。因为乔虽然当时已经十七岁，写的字还跟个农村小孩的一样，连加法算式也不会列。当时，他在沃尔顿镇边的一间大自行车店里干活，原意是指望他“学着做生意”。捣鼓自行车适合乔，跟绝大多数傻不愣登的人一样，乔也有那么一点儿机械方面的能耐，可是他根本不能安心干活，所有时间都用来穿着油花花的工装裤闲逛、吸伍德白恩牌烟、打架、喝酒（他早就开始了）、跟一个又一个女孩“谈对象”和缠着我爸要钱。我爸感到烦恼而迷惑，且略微有些恨意。我现在还能想象到他的样子：他的光头顶上沾着磨粉，耳朵上边有灰白头发，戴着眼镜，胡子灰白色。他理解不了他碰上了什么事。多年以来，他挣的利润呈缓慢稳定上升趋势，今年十镑，下一年二十镑，如今利润却猛跌下来，他理解不了为什么。他是从他爸爸那里继承的生意，做生意诚信为本，干活辛苦，货物保证质量，童叟无欺——利润却下降了。在吸着牙想把面包屑吸出的间隙，他说了好几遍日子很不好过，生意好像很难做，他想不通人们都是怎么回事，好像也不是马不吃东西了。可能是因为如今的机动车，这是他最终的推断。“恶心人的臭东西！”我妈插了句嘴。她有点儿担心，而且知道她按说应该更担心一些。我爸说着话时，有那么一两次，她眼里有一丝恍惚的样子，我也能看到她的嘴唇在动。她正在决定明天是再吃一天牛肉和胡萝卜呢，还是吃一条羊腿。除了对她负责的那些——例如买衣料和菜盘子——需要一点儿预见，对超出明天三餐之外的，她就不怎么会考虑。铺子有些麻烦，我爸在操心——这差不多是她所能了解的全部。

但我们谁都不知道是怎么回事。我爸这一年不顺，亏了钱，可他真的被前景吓倒了吗？我不这样想。记住，那是在一九〇九年。我爸不知道怎么回事，他预见不到撒拉辛斯的人会有条不紊地跟他低价竞争，打垮他，最终吞掉他。他又怎么能预见得到？他年轻时，从未经历过那种事情。他知道的只是日子不行了，生意很“难做”，很“冷清”（他总在说这几个词），不过，情况大概“很快就会好转”。

如果我能告诉你在我爸遭遇困难时，我成了他的得力帮手，突然证明自己是男子汉，有了以前谁都没想到我会拥有的素质等等，就像你会在三十年前的励志小说中读到的，那样倒是挺好。要么我想要将此记录在案，即我对必须离开学校这件事痛恨不已，我那少年的饥渴心灵向往知识及完善自我，所以对人们塞给我的枯燥无味的活计退避三舍等等，就像你在如今的励志小说里读到的。都完全是胡扯。事实上，我对可以去干活而感到激动开心，特别是我得知格里梅特老头将付给我实打实的工资，一星期十二先令，其中我自己可以留下四先令。过去三天里我念念不忘的宾菲尔德大屋马上被我淡忘了。我并不反对提前几个学期离开学校，这种事同样发生在我们学校里别的男孩身上，很平常。某个男孩总是“要去”上里丁大学，或者学习当工程师，或者去伦敦“投身商界”，或者去航海。然后突然，在通知后过了两天，他就从学校里消失了。两星期后，你会碰到他骑着自行车送蔬菜。我爸告诉我这件事之后过了五分钟，我就开始琢磨要一套新衣服，好去穿着干活。我马上提出要有一套“大人衣服”，得有当时那种时兴的领子，叫“常礼服”——我想是那么叫的。不用说，我爸妈两个人都很震惊，他们说“从来没听说过”。那年头的父母，总是尽量阻止孩子穿大人衣服，越往后推越好，其中原因我一直不是很了解。每个家庭里，在男孩开始戴第一副高领圈，或是女孩盘起头发之前，总得有一场硬仗。

那么着，谈话就从我爸生意上的问题，逐渐演变成一场耗时长久、唠唠叨叨的争吵了。我爸渐渐发怒了，重复了一遍又一遍——不时省略了“H”音，他发怒时容易那样——“好了，不给你。你想好了——不给你。”结果是我没有争取到“常礼服”，但是在头一天去干活时，我穿上做好的黑色套服，还戴着宽领圈，看上去像是个身子骨太

大的土老帽儿。我干活时动不动就分心，真正原因都是那个。乔在这件事上甚至更自私，他因为要离开自行车铺而火冒三丈，待在家里的不长时间里，他总是游来荡去，成了个讨人嫌的角色，丝毫没能帮上我爸。

我在格里梅特老头的店里干了快六年。格里梅特是个人好身体好、留着白色连鬓胡的老头，像是另一个型号的伊齐其尔叔叔，只是矮胖得多。跟伊齐其尔叔叔一样，也是个坚定的自由党员，可他不像伊齐其尔叔叔那样狂热，在镇上也更受尊重。他在布尔战争期间突然转向，对工会恨之入骨，曾因为一个售货员保存一张基尔·哈代⁵⁸的照片而炒掉了他。他是个非国教徒——实际上，他在浸礼会教堂不折不扣是个响当当的人物，那间教堂在我们那里叫“铁皮儿”——我们家是国教徒，伊齐其尔叔叔不信教。格里梅特老头是镇上的政务会委员，还是本地自由党部的一个干事。他的白色连鬓胡子、貌似虔诚地说着良心自由和党内老前辈的样子、他那巨额银行存款和有时经过“铁皮儿”时听到他所做的即兴祷词，都跟人们所说的某个信仰非国教的传奇杂货商有些类似——我想你听说过，就像这样：

“詹姆斯！”

“在，先生！”

“你有没有往糖里掺沙？”

“有，先生！”

“你有没有往糖浆里兑水？”

“有，先生！”

“那你来祈祷吧。”

天晓得我们多么经常在铺子里悄悄谈论那种故事。我们甚至真的在拉起百叶窗之前先祈祷，然后才开始一天的工作。倒不是格里梅特老头往糖里掺沙，他也知道那样做没好处。他是个精明的生意人，在

下宾菲尔德及周围地区杂货生意做得一流。除了跑腿的、驾车的和当出纳的女儿，另外还雇了三个售货员（格里梅特是个鳏夫）。头半年，我是跑腿的。后来有个售货员去里丁“开张”了，我就从进铺子以来，头一次系上了白围裙。我学会了怎样绑包裹、装一袋葡萄干、磨咖啡、使用熏肉切片机、切火腿、给刀开刃、扫地、掸去鸡蛋上的灰尘并避免打破、把货物以次充好、擦窗户、用眼估一磅奶酪、开包装箱、把一扁块黄油拍打整形等，另外最难记的，是存货的位置。我对杂货不像对钓鱼那样点点滴滴都记得清楚，可是我也记得很多。直到今天，我还知道用手指扯断一段绳子的小窍门。你要是在我面前放一台熏肉切片机，我会用得比用打字机还顺手。我能给你吹上不同等级中国茶叶的不传之秘、人造黄油的成分、鸡蛋的平均重量以及一千个纸袋的价钱。

就这样，在五年多时间里，这就是我——一个长着粉红色圆脸、鼻子稍微扁平的机灵小伙子，头发是黄油色的（不再剪得短短的，而是仔细抹了油往后抿着，以前被称为“溜光头”），在柜台后面来来去去。系着白围裙，耳朵后面夹枝铅笔，快如闪电地绑好一袋袋咖啡递给顾客，嘴里还说着“是，太太！没问题，太太！还要点儿什么，太太？”带着一点点伦敦土腔。格里梅特老头让我们干活干得很辛苦，除了星期四和礼拜天，每天都要干十一个钟头，圣诞节那星期则是噩梦般的一星期。可是回头想一想，觉得那段日子也过得不错。别以为我没抱负，我知道我不会一辈子只是当个售货员，我只是正在“学着做生意”而已。早晚有一天，不管怎么样，我会有钱自己“开张”，那年头的人们就是这样想的。记住，那是在战前，大衰退和政府开始发放失业救济金之前，谁都能在世界上一展身手，谁都能“开张做生意”，世界上总能容得下再开一间铺子。时光如梭，一九〇九、一九一〇、一九一一年过去了。爱德华国王去世，报纸边上围着黑框；沃尔顿镇上开了两间电影院；路上的小汽车越来越多，开始有横贯全国的公共汽车服务；一架飞机——一个样子不大牢靠，不结实的玩意儿，一个人坐在中间为椅子状的东西上面——飞过下宾菲尔德的天空，整个镇上的人从屋里冲出来向它喊叫；人们开始隐隐约约谈论那位越来越不可一世的德国皇帝，“它（指的是跟德国的战争）马上就要来到”；我

的工资慢慢涨了，直到最后在战争爆发前已经是二十八先令。我一星期给我妈十先令作为食宿费用，后来情况没那么好时，给我妈十五先令。尽管如此，我仍前所未有地感到富足。我又长高了一英寸，胡子开始冒出来，穿的是带扣子的靴子，领圈有三英寸高。礼拜天在教堂里，当我穿着漂亮的深灰套装，把圆顶礼帽和黑色狗皮手套放在旁边座位上时，我看上去都像是个不折不扣的上等人，我妈难掩对我的自豪之情。在干活和星期四“出外散步”的间隙，在想着衣服和女孩以外，我颇有抱负，想象自己成了像利华或者威廉·威特利⁵⁹那样的大亨。十六岁到十八岁之间，我为“长见识”狠下了一番功夫，力图在商界做出一番事业。我纠正了自己说话中漏掉“H”音的习惯，而且很大程度上改掉了我的伦敦土腔（在泰晤士河谷地区，农村方言正在消失，除了那些农场小伙子，一八九〇年以后出生的差不多每个人说话都带伦敦土腔）。我自学了利特彭斯商业学院的函授课程，自学记账和商业英语，正儿八经从头到尾读完了一本满纸荒唐言的《推销的艺术》，提高了我的算术甚至还有书写水平。到十七岁时，我还会在睡房桌子的小油灯下急于练成一手好字而熬夜。有段时间我读了很多书，通常是破案和探险小说，有时是在店里的伙计中间偷偷流传的平装书，被称为“热门”的（是翻译过来的莫泊桑和保罗·德·考克⁶⁰的作品）。但到了十八岁时，我突然变得趣味高雅，在郡图书馆办了张借书证，开始囫圇吞枣地读玛丽·克莱利、霍尔·凯恩、安东尼·霍普⁶¹的书。也差不多在那时，我参加了由牧师组织的下宾菲尔德读书小组，冬天时，每晚聚会进行“文学讨论”。在牧师的督促下，我读了点儿《芝麻与百合》，甚至还读了点儿勃朗宁的东西⁶²。

时光如梭，一九一〇、一九一一、一九一二年过去了，我爸的生意继续走着下坡路——并非一下子落到底，却是在走着下坡路。乔离家出走后，我爸和我妈都变了个样，这件事发生在我去格里梅特杂货铺干活后不久。

乔那时十八岁，长成了一副丑陋的暴徒样，五大三粗的，在家里个头最高。他肩膀很宽，头很大，脸色有点儿阴沉窝火的样子，胡须已经长得很茂盛。他要是没在乔治旅馆的酒吧间，就会在铺子的进口处晃悠，手深插在口袋里，眉头紧皱，盯着路过的人，好像要把人家

凑趴下似的，除非那是个女孩。有人进铺子，他会往边上闪得刚好能让人家过去，手还插在口袋里，然后扭过头扯着嗓子喊道：“爸！买东西！”他帮的最大的忙顶多是那样。我爸和我妈曾经绝望地说他们“不知道该拿他咋办”。他还喝酒，抽烟一根接一根，花钱如流水。有天深夜他离家出走，从此音信皆无。他撬开放钱的抽屉，把里面的钱全拿走了，好在不多，八镑左右，但已经够坐轮船统舱去美国了。他一直想去美国，我认为他可能真的去了，虽然我们从来没确定过。这件事在镇上多少成了件丑闻。一致的说法是乔之所以跑掉，是因为他把一个女的肚子搞大了。那个女的叫莎莉·奇弗斯，跟西蒙斯一家住在一条街上。她快生小孩了，而乔肯定跟她睡过觉，不过跟她睡过的另外还有一打人之多，谁也不知道孩子的爹是谁。我爸接受了关于有小孩的说法，甚至私下以此来原谅他们“可怜的孩子”偷了八镑并跑掉的行为。他们没能明白乔之所以跑掉，是因为他受不了在乡下小镇上体面正派地过日子，他想过的是游手好闲、打架和有女人的日子。我们再也没他的消息，可能彻底堕落了，可能在战争中死掉了，也可能只是他懒得写信而已。好在那个小孩生下来就没气了，所以没让事情更复杂。至于乔偷了八镑钱的事，我爸和我妈直到他们去世都秘不告人。在他们眼里，这件事比莎莉·奇弗斯的小孩还要丢人得多。

因为操心乔的事，我爸老了很多。走了乔无非是少了点儿损失，但这件事刺痛了他，让他觉得面上无光。从那时起，他的胡子变得越来越灰白，个子似乎变得更矮。可能我记忆里他的样子真正是从那时开始的：头发灰白的小个子，圆脸，线条分明，满面愁容，戴着灰蒙蒙的眼镜。渐渐地，他越来越专注于担心钱的事，越来越不关心别的事。他谈论政治和礼拜天报纸比过去少了，说的更多的是生意不好做的事。我妈好像也缩小了一点儿。童年时，我记得她身躯巨大，衣服撑得鼓鼓的。她有过的黄色头发、满面笑容和十分丰满的胸脯，让她看上去像是个战舰船头的饰像。可那时的她变得越来越小，越来越忧虑，看上去比她的实际年龄还要老。在厨房里，她也没有像过去那样舍得花钱，吃羊颈肉的次数多了起来，操心煤的价格，开始用人造黄油，而以前她从来不让那种东西进家里。乔走了后，我爸没办法又雇了个跑腿的，然而从那时起，他雇的男孩岁数都很小，而且每个只雇

一两年，那些男孩也拿不动重物。我在家时，偶尔会帮他一把，可是我太自私了，没能经常帮他。我还记得他背着大袋子艰难走过院子的样子：他的身子弯得很厉害，巨大的袋子几乎把他完全遮住，他就像背着壳的蜗牛。我想那些大包重达一百五十磅，压得他的脖子和肩膀几乎贴到了地上，他那张忧虑的、戴着眼镜的脸从下往上看着。一九一一年，他把自己累垮了，只好住了几星期的医院，还为铺子请了位临时管事，这又让他的老本蚀掉了一块。看着一个小店主一步步衰败下去令人痛心，但并非突如其来，也不像干活的人被炒掉，马上要靠救济那样明显，只是生意一步步衰败下来，不很明显地时好时坏，坏的时候损失几个先令，好的时候不过是赚几个便士。有个多年的老顾客突然不来了，而是改去撒拉辛斯买东西；有人买了一打母鸡，这样每星期都要来买点儿喂鸡谷。还可以撑下去，还是“自己当家”，但操心事总是越来越多，生意越来越艰难，而且本钱一直在缩水。可以几年就这个样，命好的话，会是一辈子。伊齐其尔叔叔一九一一年去世，留下了一百二十镑，对我爸来说肯定意义非同小可。直到一九一三年，他才抵押了他的寿险保险单，我当时没听说，听说的话，就会明白那意味着什么。我觉得那时我所想的，无非是意识到我爸“干得不太好”，生意“难做”，到我有钱来“开张”，还得等更长一段时间等等。跟我爸一样，我把铺子看成一种永远不变的东西，对他没能把铺子经营好，我甚至有点儿想埋怨他。他正在慢慢被打垮，他的生意永远不会有起色。他能活到七十岁的话，无疑会进济贫院。而这些我都未能预见，我爸也不能，谁都不能。很多次，在经过市场上的撒拉辛斯商店时，我心里只是想拿我爸的灰蒙蒙的老铺子橱窗跟人家光鲜的橱窗门面相比，我更喜欢后者。我们家铺子橱窗上的“S.保灵”字样几乎难以辨认，白色字母已经剥落，鸟饲料袋子也褪了色。我从来没想到撒拉辛斯正在像绦虫一样把他生吃了。有时，我经常给他重复一些我在函授课本上读到的东西，他总是心不在焉。他继承的，是个开张多年的营生，他总是辛苦干活、公平交易、保证货物质量，一切很快就会好起来。事实上，那年头没有几个店主真的最终进了济贫院。幸运的话，到死还会有几镑钱。这是场死神和破产之间的比赛。感谢上帝，死神先接走了我爸，然后是我妈。

一九一一，一九一二，一九一三年过去了。我告诉你，活在那年头不错。一九一二年底，在牧师组织的读书小组里，我第一次见到了爱尔西·沃特斯。之前，我还像镇上所有男孩一样，会去找女孩，偶尔能跟某个搭上线，在几个礼拜天下午出去“处对象”。我从来没有真正有过自己的女孩，十六岁左右就追女孩，让人感觉古怪。在镇上那些约定俗成的地方，男孩一对对来回溜达着看女孩，女孩也是一对对来回溜达，装着没在看男孩。不久就建立起某种联系，但不是一对对，而是四个人一块儿溜达，四个人都哑口无言。那种散步的主要特点——第二次单独跟一个女孩一起出去时更是如此——是不知如何开口的难堪劲。然而跟爱尔西·沃特斯在一起好像不一样，其中的事实是，我正在迈向成人。

我不想讲述我和爱尔西·沃特斯的事，就算有什么好讲的，我也不想。她无非是场景的一部分，“战前”的一部分。在战前，总是夏天——这是幻觉，前边我已经说过，但在我记忆里的确如此。栗子树间延伸向远方的白色土路，晚紫罗兰的气味，柳树底下的绿色池塘，伯福德坝上的溅水声——我闭上眼回想“战前”时，看到的就是这些，而在将到结尾时，爱尔西·沃特斯占据了其中一部分。

我不知道爱尔西现在能不能称得上漂亮，但当时的确是。她是个高个子女孩，差不多跟我一样高。她的头发是浅金黄色，很厚实，她设法编成辫子盘在头上。她的脸庞清秀而且很温柔，她是那种穿黑色衣服时最好看的女孩，特别是布店要求穿的那种很朴素的黑衣服。她在莉莉怀特布店干活，可是她老家在伦敦。我想她比我大两岁。

我对爱尔西心怀感激，因为是她最早教会我去关心女人。我不是说所有女人，而是说某一位女人。我是在读书小组认识她的，但几乎没有注意过她。后来有一天，我在上班时间进了莉莉怀特布店，一般时候我没办法去，可是那天我们包黄油的布刚好用完了，格里梅特老头让我去买一点儿。你也知道布店里的那种氛围，是种特别女性化的氛围，里面有种禁声的感觉。灯光暗淡，布匹散发着冷冷的气味，滚来滚去的木球让人有种稍稍眩晕的感觉。爱尔西靠着柜台，用大剪刀剪着一段布。她所穿的黑色裙子和压在柜台上的胸部呈现出的曲线散

发出——我描述不出来，那是种极其温顺、极其女性化的气息。一看到她，就知道她是可以抱入怀里的，想对她怎么样就怎么样。她浑身洋溢着女人味，非常温和，非常听话，是那种男人叫她干吗她就会干吗的女人，可是她的个子不小，身体也不弱。她一点儿也不笨，只是说话很少，有时极其文雅，不过当时的我也已经相当文雅了。

我们同居了差不多一年。当然，在下宾菲尔德这种地方，只能是象征性同居。大家认可的说法，是我们在“处对象”，那是种被认可的风俗，但又跟订婚不太一样。往上宾菲尔德的路在山脚下另外岔出一条路，这条路很长，将近一英里，而且笔直，两边都是高大的栗子树。路边草地上，树枝之下有条人行小道，人称“情人道”。五月的傍晚我们经常到那里，当时的栗子树繁花似锦。往后黑夜就短了，我们离开铺子后还有几个钟头天才会黑下来。你也知道那种六月黄昏时的感觉：蓝色霞光久久不逝，空气像丝绸般吹拂着脸庞。有时候，在礼拜天下午，我们上到查姆福特山，然后走到泰晤士河边的草地那里。一九一三！我的天哪！一九一三！那种宁静、绿水，还有坝上的哗哗流水！它永不再来。我不是说一九一三年永不再来，而是心里那种感觉，不用匆匆忙忙，没有担惊受怕的感觉。这种感觉要么你曾经有过，不用我来告诉你；要么你从未有过，以后也不会有机会体验。

直到夏天快过完时，我们才开始那种被称为“同居”的生活。我一贯脸皮太薄，太笨手笨脚，不知道怎么开始，而且我也太无知，以至于不知道在我之前她还有过别人。一个礼拜天下午，我们去了围绕着上宾菲尔德的山毛榉林子里，在那里总是可以不受打扰。我很想得到她，而且我也一清二楚她在等我采取主动。不晓得为什么，我想去宾菲尔德大屋那里看看。荷吉斯老头已经七十多岁，脾气越来越暴躁，他还是有力气把我们赶走的，但礼拜天下午他大概在睡觉。我们从围栏的一个缺口钻进去，顺着山毛榉树下的小道走到大池塘那里。离我上次那样做已经有四年或者四年多了。一切都没改变，依旧与世隔绝，还是在周围的大树下藏匿起来的感觉。老船屋还在灯芯草丛中腐烂着。我们躺在草地中间那个小小的凹处，就在野薄荷丛旁边。那里再无别人，我们就像在非洲中部一样。天晓得我亲她亲了多久，然后我站起身，又在附近转悠起来。我很想得到她，想快刀斩乱麻办了那

事，只不过我有点儿提心吊胆。而且很奇怪，我心里还在想着另外一件事。我突然想到有好几年，我一直想回来却从来没有回来过。而那时，我离它那么近，要是不过去到另外一个池塘看看那些大鲤鱼，好像会是件叫人遗憾的事，我觉得错过那次机会的话，我将后悔不已。事实上，我也想不出我为什么在那之前没回来过。那些鲤鱼被我保存在脑子里，除了我谁也不知道，有一天我要去钓。实际上，它们是我的鲤鱼。我真的开始沿池塘岸边向那个方向走去，但我走了差不多十码就转身了。要想过去，就意味着得在纠缠的刺藤和烂树枝中闯出一条路，可那天我穿的是礼拜天的最好装束：深灰色套装，圆顶礼帽，带扣的靴子和几乎要把耳朵割下来的领圈。那年头的人们礼拜天下午散步时，就是那个装束。而且我还是很想得到爱尔西。我走回去在她身边站了一会儿。她躺在草地上，手盖着脸，听到我走近，她还是一动不动。她穿着黑裙子，显得——我不知道为什么，有种温柔、听话的样子，像是某种具有可塑性的物件，想怎样对待她都行。她是我的，我可以得到她，那会儿想要就能要。突然，我不再提心吊胆了。我把帽子甩在草地上（记得它还弹了一下），跪下去抱住了她。我现在好像还能闻到野薄荷味。那是我的第一次，但她不是第一次。你可能以为我们搞得很糟糕，但并非如此。事情经过就是这样，大鲤鱼又从我脑子里消退了，实际上，此后几年里，我几乎再也没有想起过它们。

一九一三，一九一四，一九一四年的春天。先是黑刺梨，然后是山楂，接着栗子树也开花了。礼拜天下午，沿着拖船道的一路，风吹着大丛的灯芯草，结果它们一起摇动，很厚实的一大块，不知为何，就像女人的头发。绵绵无尽的夏日傍晚，栗子树下的小道，一只猫头鹰不知在哪里叫着，爱尔西的身体贴着我。那年的七月很热，我们在铺子里流了多少汗，还有奶酪及磨过的咖啡味多么刺鼻啊！然后是傍晚在外面的那种凉爽感觉，菜地后面的小道上晚紫罗兰和烟斗的气味，脚下的柔软尘土，欧夜鹰在盘旋着捕捉金龟子。

老天！说一个人不该为“战前的事”多愁善感又有何用？我的确因为那些而多愁善感，你记得的话，你也会。一点儿没错，当你回想某段时光时，会倾向记住一些愉快的片段，甚至对战争也是这样，然而

同样没错的，是那时候人们拥有的一些东西，是如今的我们所缺少的。

是什么？只不过他们不觉得前景让人害怕。不是说当时的日子比现在好过，实际上比现在还艰苦。总的说来，人们干活干得更辛苦，过得不如现在舒适，死时也更痛苦。在农场干活的人每天劳动时间长得惊人，一星期才挣十四先令，到头来成了精疲力竭的废人，靠每星期五先令的老年养老金和堂区偶尔发放的半克朗过活。而那种“体面的”贫困则更为难过些。大街那头的小布商小个子沃尔森挣扎几年后终于关门时，他的个人财产是二镑九先令六便士。接着，在得了所谓的“胃病”后，他几乎马上就死了，但医生透露是饥饿所致，不过他总算到最后一刻也不失尊严。制表匠的帮手克林姆普老头是个熟练的工匠，他从小就干这行，一直干了五十年。他得了白内障，不得不进了济贫院。他被带走时，他的几个孙子哭号着。他老婆出去帮人打杂，累死累活地干活，才能一直每星期给他送去一先令作为零用钱。有时能看到令人痛心的事在发生着：小生意如下山般一滑而下，殷实的生意人一天天走向无以为继，最终破产；癌症和肝病一步步将人置于死地；喝醉的丈夫每星期一写下保证不再喝酒，但每星期六又破了戒；女孩因为私生子毁了一辈子；房子里没有浴室，冬天的早晨得把洗脸盆里的冰敲开；偏僻街道在天热时臭气熏天；教堂墓地正好在镇中间，让你没有一天不记着你的归宿将在何处。那么，当时的人们又有什么？一种安全感，即使他们自己都不安全。更准确地说，那是种“明天仍然会继续”的感觉。他们所有人都知道自己将会死掉，而且我想有那么几个人知道自己将会破产，但他们不知道各方面的秩序都会改变，不管他们可能遇到什么，事情都会按照他们所知道的继续下去。尽管当时宗教信仰很盛行，但我相信对此影响不大。不错，差不多每个人都上教堂，跟全国别的地方比例差不多——当然，爱尔西和我还上教堂，即使我们当时像牧师所称的，生活在罪恶中，但如果你问那些人他们是否相信人死后仍有生命，他们通常会回答相信。但我从来没遇到过一个人能给我他们真的相信有来世的印象。我觉得人们相信那种事，顶多就跟孩子相信有圣诞老人一样。但那个时期丝毫不差，正处于一个已经成型的时期，当时的世事氛围就跟大象四条腿着

地一样稳定，因此像来生这种事情就不重要了。如果你在乎的东西都将继续下去，就会死得很放心。你已经活了一辈子，累了，该去地下了——这就是以前人们的看法。从个体上来说，他们不复存在，然而他们的生活方式将会继续，好的和坏的方面都保持不变。他们感觉不到脚下的大地正在移动。

我爸的生意正在走向穷途末路，但是他不知道。在他看来，只是日子越来越不好过，生意似乎淡了又淡，收入支出越来越难以平衡。感谢上帝，他根本不知道他算是被毁掉了；他从来没有真正破产，那是因为他在一九一五年初突然去世（流感转成了肺炎）。直到最后，他都相信靠着俭省勤劳、公平交易，一个人就不会走错路。肯定还有不少小店主也抱有这种信念，不仅是直到破产前，就连到了济贫院还是。马鞍匠拉夫格鲁夫甚至在小汽车和机动货车直扑过来时，还没意识到他已经像犀牛一样落伍于时代。我妈也是——她活了一辈子，从来没意识到她从小长大所过的那种生活方式，即在伟大的维多利亚女王治下正派的、虔敬上帝的店主之女，然后是正派的、虔敬上帝的店主之妻的生活方式永远结束了。世事艰难，生意不好，我爸在操心，这个那个“一天不如一天”，但日子还是以一贯以来差不多的方式继续着，那种旧的英格兰生活秩序不能变。对我妈那样虔敬上帝的正派人来说，永远不变的，便是在巨大的煤炉上做约克郡布丁和苹果汤团，穿羊毛内衣，睡羽绒被，七月制青梅酱，十月做泡菜，下午读《希尔达居家伴侣》，苍蝇还嗡嗡地飞来飞去。她待在她那个舒舒服服的小世界里，其中包括煮茶、有毛病的腿和皆大欢喜的结局。我不是说我爸妈直到最后还是一点儿都没改变。他们有些震惊，有时也有些沮丧，但至少他们活着时，从来不知道他们相信过的一切正在变成过时之物。他们生活在一个时代的末尾，一切正在分崩离析，被卷入一股令人望而生畏的洪流。他们并不知道这点，却以为那是千秋万代的事。不能说他们错了，他们感受到的就是那样。

然后到了七月底，甚至在下宾菲尔德也能感到正在发生什么事。一连好多天，报纸上有种说不清道不明的极其强烈的兴奋感，还有没完没了的头版文章，我爸居然把报纸从铺子那边拿到屋里大声念给我妈听。后来突然间，到处都贴上了海报：

德国发出最后通牒；法国开始总动员

一连几天（四天，是不是？我记不清是几天），可以感觉到一种令人窒息的奇怪感觉，某种息声闭气的等待，就像大雷雨来临前的一刻，似乎整个英国都在不出声地听着。我记得当时天气很热。在铺子里，好像我们都无心干活，不过附近每个能拿出五先令的人都冲进铺子里买很多罐头食品、面粉和燕麦粉。好像我们都兴奋得没法干活，只是流着汗等待。到了晚上，人们去火车站那里，为抢购伦敦来的火车带来的晚报而争得不可开交。后来，在某天下午，一个男孩出现了，他跑过大街，胳膊下面夹的全是报纸。人们全走到门口隔着街喊着，每个人都在喊：“我们参战了！我们参战了！”那个男孩从一叠报纸里抓了一张贴在对面的铺子橱窗上：

英国对德宣战

我们三个售货员都冲到人行道上欢呼，每个人都在欢呼。没错，在欢呼。但是格里梅特老头，虽然他在战争恐慌中已经大捞一笔，却还是守着他那点儿自由党的信条，不支持打仗，并说那是件坏事。

两个月后，我参军了。七个月后，我身在法国。

八

到一九一六年底，我终于受伤了。

那时，我们刚刚从战壕里出来，正在一段路上行军，距前线大约一英里，应该是安全的，但可能此前不久，那里已在德国人的射程之内。突然，他们打过来几发炮弹——是那种高能量的玩意儿，差不多一分钟才打一发，就是常见的“啾——！”，然后是“咚！”的一声，炸响在左边地里。我想炸中我的是第三发，听它飞来，我马上就知道是冲我来的，上面写着我的名字呢。有人说，你总是知道哪一发是冲你来的，它的声音不是一般炮弹所发出的声音，而是：“我冲你来了，你个××，你，你个××，你！”——所有这一切，都发生在大约三秒钟内，最后的一声“你”就是爆炸声。

我感到好像有只空气做的巨手把我扫开。马上，随着进破和碎裂的感觉，我掉进路边沟里的一大堆旧罐头盒、木头碎片、锈铁丝网、粪便、空弹药盒和其他乱七八糟的东西中。人们把我拖出来，并把我身上的灰尘清理一部分后，发现我伤得不厉害，只是有很多弹壳小碎片炸进我屁股一侧和腿后部靠下面的地方。但幸运的是，我摔倒时摔断了一根肋骨，受伤程度刚好让我可以被送回英国。我那个冬天的时间都花在一个医护营里，就在靠近伊斯特本⁶³的石灰岩地区。

你知不知道那种战时的医护营？一长排一长排的木制小屋就像鸡舍，直接建在能冻死人的石灰岩上——人们以前称之为“南岸”，让我纳闷“北岸”会是什么样——那里的风好像来自四面八方。穿着灰蓝色法兰绒军装、系着红色领带的伙计一群群游来荡去，想找个避风处，可是从来找不到。有时，伊斯特本有名男校的小孩会两个一排被领着给我们发烟卷和薄荷冰淇淋，他们称我们为“挂彩的大兵”。会有一个脸蛋粉红、八岁左右的小孩走到坐在草地上的一堆伤兵那里，撕开一包伍德百恩烟卷，表情严肃地给每人发一支，好像在动物园喂猴子一样。不管是谁，只要身体还行，都会在那片石灰岩地区逛上几英里，希望能碰到女孩，可附近从来没有几个女孩。营房下面的山谷里有片矮树林，离黄昏还很早时，就能看到每棵树那里都靠着一对黏在一块儿的男女。有时，如果那刚好是棵粗树，每边就会有一对。关于那段日子，我主要记着的是坐在荆豆树丛边上，就在凛冽的寒风中，手指冻得无法弯曲，嘴里是薄荷冰淇淋的味道。那就是当兵时的代表性记忆，但是不管怎样，当时我已经不再是个大兵。我受伤前，我们的指挥官把我作为升职对象报了上去。不过当时军官奇缺，任何人只要不完全是个文盲，只要愿意，就能被任命。出院后，我直接去了科尔切斯特⁶⁴的军官培训营。

战争对人的影响很奇怪。仅仅不到三年前，我还是铺子里一个手脚麻利的售货员，系着白围裙，腰弯在柜台上，嘴里说着“是，太太！没问题，太太！还要点儿什么，太太？”往前看，当个杂货商就是我的前途，至于当军官，在我脑子里跟获得骑士爵位一样遥不可及。而如今的我，已经戴上了怪里怪气的帽子和黄色领圈，大摇大摆地走路了，跟其他临时的上等人（有人出身便是如此）混在一起，也

差不多能做到不掉份。而且——这才是我要说的——从哪方面说都不会感到奇怪，那年头，什么都见怪不怪。

就好像你被一台巨型机器捉住，你感觉到再也无法随心所欲地做事，同时也没有抵抗的念头。人们如果没有这种感觉，那么不管什么仗，都不会打得超过三个月，部队也就收拾家伙各自回国了。我为什么参军？还有，为什么有一百万别的蠢货会在强制征兵前参军？一半是因为好玩，一半是因为英国，英格兰，我的英格兰，我的不列颠千秋万代如何如何的玩意儿。但那些又能持续多久？我所认识的多数伙计在到法国前就把这忘得一干二净。战壕里的那些人不是爱国者。他们不恨德国皇帝，根本不在乎英勇的小个子比利时人以及德国人在布鲁塞尔的街道上、在桌子上强奸修女（总是在“桌子上”，好像那样更恶劣似的）。另一方面，他们也没想着当逃兵。那台机器已经捉住了你，想把你怎么样就能把你怎么样。它把你抓起来，然后把你扔到某些地方做某些事情，那都是你做梦也想不到的。就算它把你扔到月亮上，也不会特别离奇。从我参军那天起，老的日子就算过到了头，好像不再与我有关。从参军那天起，我唯一一次回下宾菲尔德就是参加我妈的葬礼，不知道你信不信？现在说起来难以置信，但在当时好像再正常不过。我承认部分是因为爱尔西·沃特斯，不用说，我走了两三个月后，就不再给她写信。毫无疑问她又搭上了别人，我不想跟她再见面。如果不是为了这，我在休假时也许会回去看看我妈，她在我参军时曾大发脾气，可是她也会因为有个穿军装的儿子而自豪。

我爸是一九一五年死的，当时我在法国。跟那时比起来，我爸的死现在更让我伤心，这不是夸张。在当时，那只是坏消息中的一条，我接受了这个消息，却几乎毫无兴趣，脑子里空荡荡的，感情淡漠。在战壕里，人们对待任何事都是那样。我记得我爬到地下掩体的进口处，好趁着亮光看信，我还记得我妈滴在信上的泪痕，还有膝盖的痛觉和泥巴的气味。我爸的寿险保险单几乎按全部价值抵押了，不过银行里还有点儿钱。撒拉辛斯准备购下存货，而且出于好意，甚至多付了一点儿钱。不管怎么样，我妈有两百多镑，还不包括家具。她暂时去住在她表妹家，她表妹嫁了个小农场主，从战争中捞了不少，地方是在沃尔顿另一边几英里远的多克西利附近。我妈只是“临时”住在那

里，当时无论对什么，都有种“临时”的感觉。要在那年头——说是那年头，其实才过去了一年——这种事会是令人震惊的大灾难。我爸死了，铺子卖掉了，我妈在这世界上还有两百镑钱，往前看，未来有点儿像是一场十几幕长的悲剧，最后一幕便是穷人的葬礼。但在那时，战争和无法掌握自己命运的感觉笼罩了一切，人们几乎不再想破产和济贫院的事。甚至对我妈来说也是这样，老天为证，她以前对战争仅仅有着极为模糊的概念。还有，她当时已经在走向死亡，但是我们俩都不知道。

我在伊斯特本住院时，她来看过我，那时我已经两年多没见过她，她的样子让我有些震惊。她似乎褪了点儿颜色，不知道为什么，也缩小了。部分原因是到那时，我已经长成大人，也离家见了世面，对我来说，无论什么都变小了，但无疑她是变瘦了，肤色也黄了一些。她用她一贯的絮絮叨叨的方式说着玛莎姨妈（也就是跟她住在一起的她的表妹）和下宾菲尔德的变化。小伙子都“走了”（意思是参军），她消化不良的毛病“一天比一天厉害”，还有我那可怜的爸爸的墓碑以及他死时样子多么安详等等。都是那些老话，我听了很多年的老话，却不知为何，好像是由鬼魂说出，再也打动不了我。我所知道的她一直是个很了不起的、类似保护者的角色，有点儿像是船头的饰像，还有点儿像孵蛋的母鸡，但不管怎么样，那时的她，只不过是个穿黑裙子的小个子女人。她的一切都变化了，褪色了。那是她死之前我跟她见的最后一面。我在科尔切斯特训练学校时接到一封电报，里面说她病得很重，我就马上请了一星期的假，但还是太晚，我赶到多克西利时，她已经死了。她自己还有别人想象的是消化不良，其实是体内长了个肿瘤，这次她的胃突受风寒，最终夺走了她的生命。医生想让我不要过分伤心，说肿瘤是“良性”的，那让我想到用这个词来称呼它真是怪事，因为照我看，正是那个害死了她。

我们把她埋在我爸坟墓旁边，那是我最后一次看到下宾菲尔德。它变化很大，尽管才过去三年时间。有些铺子关门了，有些换了名字。几乎所有我从小就认识的男的都不在了，有几个死了。锡德·拉夫格鲁夫死了，是在索姆河⁶⁵战役中战死的；“黄毛”沃森，那个曾属于“黑手帮”的农场小伙子，能活捉兔子的，他死在埃及；有个跟我在

格里梅特的铺子里一起干过的伙计断了两条腿；老拉夫格鲁夫关了他的铺子，住在离沃尔顿不远的小屋里，靠的是一份微薄的年金。老格里梅特则不一样，他在战争中捞了不少，而且成了个爱国人士，是本地拒服兵役者审讯委员会成员。但是让这个镇子显得空荡荒凉的最主要因素，是马匹全没了，每一匹值得拉走的马很久之前就被征用。出租马车还有，但是拉它的那匹畜生如果不是辕杆撑着，站都站不住。葬礼开始前一个钟头左右，我在镇上转了一下，跟人们打招呼，也在炫耀我的军装。幸运的是，我没有碰到爱尔西。我看到了所有变化，但好像又沒有留意到，我的心思跑到了别的事情上，主要是让别人看到我身穿少尉军装时心里那股得意劲。我戴着黑色的臂章（配在卡其布军服上很是醒目），穿着新的呢料马裤。我清清楚楚记得我们站在坟墓边上时，我还在想着我的呢料马裤。后来，他们把一些土抛在棺材上，我突然意识到我妈躺在几英尺的土下面意味着什么。我鼻子一酸，眼里有了泪水，但即使在那时，呢料马裤也并未完全从我脑子里消失。

不要以为我对我妈的死无动于衷，我的确在乎。我不再是在战壕里了，我会对死感到难过，但是我他妈根本不关心，甚至也没有意识到正在发生的，是我所了解的那种旧生活方式一去不再回。玛莎姨妈对我这样一个当“真正军官”的外甥很感自豪，要不是我拦着，她会对葬礼大操大办。办完后，她坐公共汽车回了多克西利，我则乘出租马车到了火车站，坐火车去伦敦，然后再到科尔切斯特。马车经过我们家的铺子，自从我爸死后，就没人接手。它关着门，窗玻璃上的灰多得成了黑色，招牌上的“S.保灵”字样被人拿水管工用的喷灯烧掉了。唉，那就是我从小孩儿长成男孩子，最后成为一个大小伙子所住的房子。在那里，我在厨房的地板上到处爬过，闻到过豆饲料的气味，读过《无畏者多诺文》，做过文法学校的家庭作业，做过面包糊，补过自行车胎，试戴过我的第一副高领圈。在我眼里，它曾经像金字塔一样永恒不变，现在我却只会在有什么事情时才会重返。我爸，我妈，乔，跑腿的男孩，老猎犬尼勒，点点——尼勒之后的那只猎犬，红腹灰雀杰基，猫，阁楼上的耗子——全都不在了，除了灰尘，什么都没留下，可是我他妈全无所谓。我为我妈的死感到难过，

那会儿，我甚至为我爸的死感到难过，但同时，我心里还想到了别的事情。我因为让人看到坐在出租马车里而有些感到自豪，当时我对那玩意儿还不习惯。我还在想着我的新呢料马裤有多么合身，还有我那军官用的光滑平展的绑腿，跟大兵们用的粗料货太不一样了。我也在想着科尔切斯特的伙计们，想到我妈留给我的六十镑以及那笔钱能让我们吃多少顿大餐。我还感谢上帝没让我不巧再碰到爱尔西。

战争对人的影响异乎寻常，跟它杀人这方面比起来，有时候它在并非把人杀死这方面更异乎寻常。就好像那是一股特大洪水，把你向着死亡裹挟而去，然而突然，它把你冲到一个回水处，在那里，你会发现自己在做着匪夷所思而且毫无意义的事，而且为此领着不薄的薪水。有些工兵营在沙漠里修建哪里也通不到的铁路，有些伙计被放逐到大洋里的岛上，去警戒德国人几年前就被炸沉的巡洋舰，还有这样那样养着大批文职人员和打字员的政府部门，在其功能不存后仍年复一年存在着，靠的是某种惯性。人们经常被派去做一些无意义的工作，然后被当局一忘就是几年。发生在我身上的正是这样，否则我也不会待在那里，但事情的前后经过倒是挺有意思。

对我的任命宣布后没多久，军火供应委员会需要招进军官。训练营的指挥官听说我懂点儿杂货生意（我没有说实际上我只是站过柜台），他马上要把名字报上去。一切顺利，我正要去位于英格兰中部某处的另一个军火供应委员会军官训练营时，这时又需要找一名懂点儿杂货生意的年轻军官去给约瑟夫·奇姆爵士做秘书之类的工作，他是军火供应委员会里的大人物。天晓得他们是怎么回事，但不管怎样，确实是选中了我，我一直以为他们把我的名字跟别人的弄混了。三天后，我到约瑟夫·奇姆爵士的办公室向他敬礼报到。他是个很帅气的老头子，身材瘦削，腰杆笔直，头发灰白，鼻子长得很端正，我马上对他有了好感。他看上去是那种完美的职业军人，是位有军阶的KCMG或DSO⁶⁶。他也可能是德·雷什克⁶⁷的广告里那个伙计的孪生兄弟，可他在非公职生活里是位连锁杂货商店的总裁，他因为“奇姆减薪制度”而在全世界都有名。我进去时，他停笔打量了我。

“你是个上等人吗？”

“不是，先生。”

“好，那我们也许可以一起干点儿活。”

只用了三分钟，他就套出我没有当过秘书，不会速记，不会使用打字机，在杂货店干过工资为一星期二十八先令的活计。不过他说我也行，还说军队里的上等人太他妈多了，而他一直在找个能数到十以上的人。我喜欢上了他，也盼望能在他手下工作。但就在那时，似乎在操纵着战争的神秘力量又把我们分开。有支所谓的西岸防卫军正在组建，或者说正在讨论，有过隐隐约约的说法，要在海岸边上建立一处处仓库，储存配给及其他储备品。据说约瑟夫爵士负责英格兰西南角的仓库。我加入他的办公室后第二天，他派我去一个位于北康沃尔郡海滨、名为十二英里仓库的地方检查储备品，或者说我的工作是有没有储备品，那好像谁都不能肯定。我刚到那里并发现储备品包括十一罐腌牛肉后，就收到战争部的一封电报，命我负责看守十二英里仓库的储备品，并留在那里等待进一步通知。我回了封电报说“十二英里仓库无储备品”，可是已经太晚了。第二天，我收到正式函件，通知我是十二英里仓库的指挥官。这就是故事的真正结尾，我一直担任十二英里仓库的指挥官，直至战争结束。

天晓得那都是怎么一回事，你也别问我西岸防卫军是怎么回事，或者应该是什么，问我也白问。在那时，甚至谁也不会装作知道，反正它不存在，只是某个人脑子里掠过的一个计划——我想是在有谣传说德国人会从爱尔兰那边入侵时——而且沿岸所有食品配给仓库也都是凭空想象出来的。所有这一切只存在了三天，好像是种肥皂泡，然后就被忘掉，而我跟着它一起被遗忘了。那十一罐腌牛肉是由早些时候到那里执行别的神秘任务的几个军官所留，他们还留下一个耳朵很背的老头子，即二等兵利吉伯德，他怎么会留在那里，我可是从来没弄明白。从战争打到一半的当儿开始，一九一七年到一九一九年初，我一直留在那里保卫十一罐腌牛肉。你信不信？大概不会，可事实就是这样。而且在当时，甚至好像那也没什么特别奇怪的。到一九一八年，谁都不再指望事情会按道理如何如何了。

每月一次，他们寄给我一张内容庞杂的正式表格，要求填写我掌管的下列物品的数量及状况：丁字镐，挖战壕工具，带刺铁丝网，毛毯，铺地防潮布，急救包，波纹铁和李子、苹果罐头等。我在所有栏目中填了“无”之后把表格寄回去。从来都是一点儿反应也没有。在伦敦，有个人在不声不响地登记表格，然后寄出表格，然后再登记，就这样继续下去。当时，事情就是那样进行着。负责打仗的高层神秘人物完全忘记了我的存在，他们的记忆中没有我的影子，我被冲到一个回水处，哪里都去不了。我在法国待了两年后，不再有炽热的爱国观念，所想的只是置身事外。

那段海滨很空旷，除了几个几乎从来没听说正在打仗的乡巴佬，一直见不到任何人。大海只有四分之一英里远，在一座小山下面。大海汹涌澎湃，拍打着那片极其广阔的沙滩。一年里有九个月下雨，剩下三个月吹着来自大西洋的狂风。那里除了二等兵利吉伯德、我和两座临时营房外再无他物。两座营房中有座带两间房的还过得去，我就住进了那座——还有十一罐腌牛肉。利吉伯德是个粗鲁的老混蛋，我对他从来没了解到什么，只知道他参军前是个卖花的花农，有意思的是看到他多么快就干回老本行：甚至在我到十二英里仓库之前，他就在临时营房的周围开了一片地种土豆，后来秋天时他又开了一块，直到最后他有了半顷左右的地种东西。他在一九一八年初开始养母鸡，到夏天快结束时，他有了相当大的一群鸡。到年底，天晓得他又从哪弄来一头猪。我想他脑子里没有琢磨过我们到底他妈的在那里干吗，也没有想过西岸防卫军是什么或者是否真正存在过。要是现在听说他还在以前十二英里仓库所在的地方养猪种土豆，我是不会感到惊奇的。我希望他真的在那里，祝他好运。

与此同时，我在做着以前从未有机会做的专职工作——读书。

之前在那里待过的军官留下几本书，多数价钱是七便士一本，差不多全是那年头人们读的无聊书，伊安·哈伊、塞波、克里格·肯尼迪的小说等等。一个人在那里待过，迟早会知道什么书值得看，什么书不值得看，当时我却对这些一无所知。我自愿读过的书是侦探小说，偶尔也会看一本黄书。老天为证，直到今天，我也没打算当个趣味高

雅之人。如果你在那时要我说出几本“好”书的名字，我会说是《你给我的女人》或者《芝麻与百合》（想到了那位牧师）。不管怎样，“好”书是人们不愿去读的书。但我当时的工作便是无所事事。海洋在海滩上轰鸣，雨在窗户玻璃上淌个不停——还有一整排书，在某个人靠着小屋的墙搭起的书架上跟我对望。自然而然，我开始一本本读起来，一开始不分好坏，跟一头猪在垃圾堆里一路拱过去差不多。

然而在那些书里头，有那么三四本跟其他书不一样。别，你误会我了！不要按你自己的想法，以为我发现了马塞尔·普鲁斯特或者亨利·詹姆斯⁶⁸或者别的什么人，就算那里有他们的书，我也不会去看。我要提到的书根本不算高雅，但时不时会有这种事情发生，就是你会碰到一本跟你目前达到的思维水平刚好处于同一等级的书，以至于让这本书读起来就好像专门为你而写的。那些书中有一本H.G.威尔斯⁶⁹的《波利先生的历史》，是那种廉价的一先令价钱版本，快散架了。像我这样一个作为店主的儿子、在农村长大的人遇到那样一本书，它对我产生的影响不知道你能不能想象得到？另外一本书是康普顿·麦肯齐⁷⁰的《邪恶街》。几年前这本书一时很有争议，我在下宾菲尔德隐隐约约听说过。另一本书是康拉德⁷¹的《胜利》，其中有些部分让我看得烦，但是那种书能让人思考。还有本蓝色封面的某种杂志旧刊，里面有D.H.劳伦斯的一个短篇，我不记得题目了。它是关于一个德国应征新兵把他的准尉推下防御工事跑掉，后来在他女朋友的睡房里被抓到的事。这篇小说让我感到困惑，不明白它讲的是什么，却给了我一种隐隐约约的感觉，就是我要再去读一下别的类似作品。

就那么着，一连几个月，我读书的胃口大开，几乎像是一种生理上的饥饿。那是我自从阅读迪克·多诺文的故事以后，头一次全身心投入地读书。一开始，我不知道怎样才能找到书本，我以为唯一途径就是买。我觉得这有点儿意思，因为它说明了在不同出身背景下成长对人们的影响。我想中产阶级的人，也就是一年收入有五百英镑的人从还在摇篮里时起，就知道穆迪流通图书馆和泰晤士读书会了。后来没多久，我知道世界上有可以借书的图书馆，就在穆迪和另外一家位于布里斯托尔的图书馆办了入会手续。此后一年左右时间里，我读了多少本书啊！作者包括威尔斯、康拉德、吉卜林、高尔斯华绥、巴里·培

恩、W.W.杰克布斯、派特·瑞基、奥利佛·奥尼恩斯、H.塞顿·麦里曼、莫里斯·巴林、斯蒂芬·麦肯那、梅·辛克莱、阿诺德·贝尼特、安东尼·霍普、爱里娜·格林、欧·亨利、斯蒂芬·里柯克，甚至还有西拉斯·霍京和吉恩·斯特拉顿·波特⁷²。这些名字你知道几个？那年头人们重视过的书，到现在半数都已被忘掉。但在开始时，我把那些书全囫圇吞枣读了下来，就像一头鲸鱼游进了虾群。我完全陶醉其中不能自拔。当然，过了一段时间，我的趣味提高了些，开始能辨别哪些是无聊的书，哪些不是。我拿到一本劳伦斯的《儿子和情人》，有点儿喜欢，后来读奥斯卡·王尔德的《道林·格雷的肖像》和斯蒂文森的《新天方夜谈》也特别喜欢。威尔斯是给我印象最深的作家。我读过乔治·摩尔⁷³的《埃斯特·沃特斯》并喜欢上了它。我也试着读了哈代的几个长篇，可总是看一半就看不下去。我甚至还看了点儿易卜生⁷⁴的书，给我留下的模糊印象是挪威那里天天下雨。

这很古怪，真的，即使在当时，我也觉得很古怪。我是个少尉，几乎已经不带伦敦土腔了，我已经能分辨出阿诺德·贝尼特和爱里娜·格利的风格，但仅仅四年前，我还在柜台后面切着奶酪，指望有一天能当上一流的杂货店主呢。全面衡量一下，我想我肯定会承认战争对我的影响有好有坏。不管怎样，读了一年的小说，在学习书本这方面，那是我有过的唯一一段真正的教育，对我的心智产生了一定作用，让我有了种态度，一种怀疑的态度，那是倘若我按部就班过日子就无法获得的。但是——我怀疑你能否明白这一点——真正将我改变，真正给我留下印象的，更多来自我所经历的糟糕透顶、了无意义的日子，而不是那些书本。

那真是无法形容的了无意义，就是在一九一八年。你看我，坐在临时营房的火炉边看小说，而在几百英里远的法国，枪炮在吼着，那些可怜的孩子吓得屁滚尿流，却还是被驱赶进机关枪的火力网中，就像向炉子里扔小块焦炭一样。我是个幸运儿，那些高层人物遗漏了我，结果我就待在那个温暖舒适的小窝里，为一份并不存在的工作领薪水。有时，我会心里一阵慌张，他们可得记着我，找到我啊，但这从来不曾发生。那份印在粗质灰色纸上的正式表格每月都寄给我，我填了再寄回去。然后还有表格寄来，我都填好寄回，就这样一天天过

下去。整件事情，就像精神错乱的人所做的梦一样没道理，所有这些，再加上我读过的那些书，留给我的是一种不相信任何事情的感觉。

我不是唯一特例，整场战争中，充满了没头绪的事和被遗忘的角落。到这时，那些人——不折不扣地说有上百万——被滞留在这里那样的回水处。整支整支的军队在前线无所事事，番号已被忘掉。还有一些庞大的政府部门，养着大批每星期挣两镑的文职人员和打字员，只是往上堆着文件山，而且他们也一清二楚他们所做的，只是往上堆积文件山。谁也不再相信暴行和英勇的比利时人的传说，当兵的不认为德国人是坏人，却对法国人恨之入骨。低级军官无不认为总参谋部的都是些智力不健全的人。一种怀疑的风气正席卷英国，甚至也到了十二英里仓库。要说战争把人人都变成了高雅之士有些夸张，但是它的确暂时把人们变成了虚无主义者。一般情况下，人们不大可能觉得自己如板油布丁那样微不足道，同样，他们也不大可能成为左翼人士，战争却把他们变成了左翼人士。要不是因为战争，我现在会在哪里？我不知道，但不会是现在这样。如果战争没能要你的命，它会让你开始思考。经过那些其蠢无比的混乱局面，你不会还认为社会是像金字塔那样永恒不变和无可置疑，你了解到它不过是一片混沌而已。

九

战争把我抛离了我熟悉的那种旧生活方式，但在战争结束后那段颇不寻常的日子里，我几乎完全把它忘了。

我知道从某种意义上说，谁都不可能忘掉什么。你记得十三年前阴沟里的一块橘子皮，还有在火车站候车室瞟过一眼的托基⁷⁵彩色海报。但我说的是另外一种记忆。我多少记得下宾菲尔德的旧生活方式，我记得我的鱼竿和豆料的气味，坐在褐色茶壶后面的我妈，红腹灰雀杰基和市场上的马槽。但在我脑子里，所有那些都不再是活生生的，而是遥远的，跟我已经了断，我从来没想到有一天，我可能盼望再回到那里。

那是段很不寻常的日子，就是紧接着战后的那几年，几乎比战争

本身还要不寻常，即使人们现在对战争已经记得不是很清楚。尽管形式很不一样，但那种不再相信任何事的感觉比任何时候都来得更强烈。上百万人突然被踢出部队，发现他们为之战斗过的国家并不需要他们，劳合·乔治⁷⁶和他那一帮人还在勉力维持尚存的幻想。一队队退伍军人走来走去噤里啪啦地捡箱子，蒙着面纱的女人在大街上卖唱，穿着军官制服上衣的伙计演奏手摇风琴。在英国，好像每个人都在折腾着找工作，也包括我，但是我比多数人都要幸运些。我得到了一小笔受伤补贴，再加上战争最后一年里我存的钱（我没有多少花钱机会），离开部队时，我的存款不低于三百五十镑。想想自己当初的反应，我觉得很有点儿意思。那时的我，手里有足够的钱可以去干我原定长大后要做的事，也是我梦想好多年的事——开铺子。我有足够的资本，如果花些时间，多加注意，我就能碰到以三百五十镑当本钱的很不错的生意。但是，相信我吧，我从来没有动过那念头。我不仅没有采取任何行动准备开铺子，而且实际上直到几年后的一九二五年左右，我才第一次想到当初我也许可以那样干。其中的事实在于，我已经脱离了开铺子、经营铺子的轨道，这就是战争对个人的影响，它曾把我变成了一个冒牌上等人，并一直想着总会有办法挣点儿钱。如果你在一九一九年时建议我开铺子——就算是间烟草兼糖果铺吧，或者在偏僻的村子里开间杂货铺——我都只会一笑置之。我扛过带星的肩章，社会地位也提高了。同时，我不像别的退伍军官一样，有着余生尽可以喝粉红色杜松子酒度日的幻想，在那些人中间，这种想法相当流行。我知道我必须找份工作，至于工作，当然会是在“商界”——只是什么样的工作还不知道。不过会是高层的，重要的，有汽车，有电话，可能的话，再来个长着自来卷头发的女秘书。战时最后一年左右，我们中间很多人都有那种幻觉。当过商店巡视员的伙计想象自己当上旅行推销员，当过旅行推销员的伙计则想象自己当上董事经理。那就是军队生活对人的影响，扛过带星肩章、带过支票簿、称晚饭为正餐的种种对人们的影响。同时，还有种流行的想法——无论当兵的，还是当军官的都是如此——那就是离开部队后，会有工作等着我们去做，而且薪水不会低于部队里的。当然，那种想法没有流行起来的话，什么仗都打不起来。

唉，那份工作我没找到。好像没人急着要付给我一年两千镑，让我坐在有着最新潮家具的办公室里，向一个长着淡金黄色头发的女人口授信函。跟当过军官的伙计里四分之三的人一样，我也发现了同一件事，即从金钱角度上说，我们很难再像在部队里那样生活优裕，我们突然从领国王陛下薪水的上等人，变成谁都不要的可怜的失业人员。不久，我的期望值便从一年两千镑降到一星期三四镑，但是就连一星期三四镑的工作也好像没有。任何现有的工作都被人干完了，他们要么是岁数大了点儿而不适合打仗，要么是小了几个月打不了仗。恰好出生在一八九〇到一九〇〇年之间的可怜鬼算是倒了大霉。可是，我仍然从未想过回到杂货生意上。大概我能找到一个杂货店售货员的活干，格里梅特老头如果还在世并且还干着那一行（我跟下宾菲尔德没联系，不知道），他会为我提供很好的推荐信的。可是我已经上了另外一条轨道，即便我的社会地位没有能升上去，也很难想象在我见识了那么多、学到那么多之后，还会回去过站在柜台后面的旧式安稳日子。我想到处旅行，搂进大把的票子，主要想当个旅行推销员，我知道那适合我。

但是没有旅行推销员的工作——也就是说没有既能旅行又有工资的工作。不过有一些挣佣金的工作，那种骗局当时正在开始大规模发展起来。那是种可以既增加销量又可以给产品做广告而不必担风险的漂亮而且简单的方法，这种工作总在世事艰难时盛行。他们暗示三个月之内，有可能给你一份有薪水的工作，这样就把你套上了。等你受够了，总会有些可怜鬼接过去继续干。自然，我不久就干上了挣佣金的工作，事实上，我很快就做成了第一笔生意。感谢上帝，我从来没有沦落到挨家挨户兜售吸尘器和词典，但是我当旅行推销员推销过刀具、肥皂粉，还有一系列新型产品，如开瓶塞器、开罐器等小玩意儿，最后还有办公用品系列——回形针、复写纸、打字色带等等。我干得也不算差，我是那种的确能卖出东西并赚到佣金的人。我具备那种性格，也懂技巧，过的日子却从来离滋润差得很远。干那种工作你没办法达到——不用说，那种工作本来就不是让你能过上滋润日子的。

我干旅行推销员总共干了有一年，那是段很不寻常的日子：横贯

全国的旅途，摸索着到达很邪门的地方，到你正常地过几十辈子都不会听说过的内陆城镇郊区。差到极点的包早餐的旅馆，那里的床单上，总是隐约能闻到粪便味，早餐煎蛋的蛋黄比柠檬的颜色还要淡。而且总能碰到别的推销员可怜鬼：中年人，一家之主，穿着虫蛀了的大衣，戴圆顶礼帽。他们真诚地相信生意迟早会好转，挣的钱就可以猛涨到一星期五镑。还得疲惫地从一家铺子走到下一家，跟不想听的店主争辩，顾客进来时往后退，让自己不显眼。你别以为那让我特别难受，可是对有些伙计而言，那种生活折磨人。有些伙计总得先把自己修理一番，才能走进一家铺子打开样品包，就像是去上绞刑台。我不那样，我不会轻易放弃，我能说服人们购买他们本来不想买的东西，就算他们砰的一声在我面前摔上门，我也不会很在意。事实上我喜欢卖东西挣佣金，只要我能设法从中挣到一点儿小钱。我不知道那一年里，我是不是学到了很多，但是我抛掉了不少东西。这一年里，我把关于部队的胡思乱想完全去掉了，而且把闲着的那一年里从读小说中得到的观念抛到了脑后。赶路时，除了侦探小说，别的书我想我没读过一本，我不再是个趣味高雅之士，而是又回到现代社会的种种现实之中。什么是现代社会的种种现实？这么说吧，主要就是为了卖出东西而时刻不停、紧张不已地奋斗。多数人的方式是出卖自己——也就是找到一份工作并保住它。我想在战后的每个月，随便你说哪一行，都是人多粥少，这给生活带来一种非常独特、极不舒服的感觉，好像一艘正在下沉的船上有十九个幸存者，却只有十四条救生带。你会说了，这又有什么特别具有现代性的？跟战争又有什么关系？唉，感觉上是有啊。感觉你一定要永远奋斗下去，忙碌下去；除非你能从别人那里抢过来，否则永远会一无所有，而且总是还有其他人在盯着你的饭碗；下个月或者下下个月，他们就要裁员了，感觉是你得收拾包袱走人——我发誓，在战前那种旧的生活方式中，不存在那种感觉。

不过话说回来，我过得也不算差。我挣到了一点儿钱，银行里还有不少，几乎有两百镑。我也没有被前景吓倒，知道我迟早能找到一份固定工作。一点儿没错，差不多一年后，时来运转，我找到了工作。我说时来运转，而事实上我也注定不会跌倒不起，我沦落到济贫

院或者进入贵族院的机会都差不多是零。我是那种中不溜秋的类型，会按照某种自然规律一样，到达一星期挣五镑的那种层次。只要还有工作可做，我就能让自己找到一份。

那发生在我兜售回形针和打字机色带的时候，当时我刚溜进舰队街77上的一幢大办公楼。实际上，那里推销员免进，但我成功地给了开电梯的一个印象，就是我的样品包不过是个公文包。我沿走廊边走边找一间小牙膏公司的办公室，有人建议我去那里试试。正在那时，我看到一个大亨从走廊那头走过来。我一望即知是个大亨，你也知道那种大生意人，他们似乎比别人占更多地方，走起路来比一般人更趾高气扬，他们放射出的金钱冲击波让你在五十码外都能感觉到。他走近我时，我看到原来是约瑟夫·奇姆爵士。当然，他穿的不是军装了，可我还是毫不费力地认出了他。我想他是去那里参加会议什么的。有两个职员或者秘书之类的人跟着他，不是真的在为他捧着袍子拖裙，因为他没穿袍子，但是不知怎么，让人感觉他们在那样做。当然，我马上向旁边闪开，但很奇怪的是，他认出了我，尽管他已经好几年没见过我。让我吃惊的是，他停下来跟我说话：

“喂，是你！我以前在哪儿见过你。你叫什么？就在嘴边，偏偏说不出来。”

“保灵，先生，以前在军火供应委员会。”

“没错，那个说他不是上等人的小伙子。你在这儿干吗？”

换个时候，我可能告诉他我在卖打字机色带，那样的话，可能话说完就完了。但是，我突然有了所谓灵机一动的念头——感觉如果我利用好那次机会，说不定会有所得益，所以我说：

“是这样的，先生，说实话，我在找工作。”

“工作，呃？嗯，不好找啊，这年头。”

他把我从头到脚打量了一秒钟，那两个捧袍子的自动退开一段距离。我看着他那张很帅的面孔，灰白的眉毛很浓，鼻子长得很漂亮。

他在打量我，我意识到他决定帮我。这种富人的能力真是奇怪啊，他刚才还正在赫赫生威地阔步走着，后面跟着喽啰，然后不知道心血来潮还是怎么样，他走到路边，如同皇帝突然扔给乞丐一枚硬币。

“这么说你想找工作？你会干什么？”

我脑子里又是灵感一现。像我这种人拼命拔高自己是没用的，还是实话实说吧。我说：“什么也不会，先生。可我想找份旅行推销员的工作。”

“推销员？嗯。不清楚我现在有没有能给你干的活，让我想想看。”

他噘起嘴唇，有一会儿，可能有半分钟吧，他想得很专注。这是件怪事，就算在当时，我也意识到那是件怪事。这个举足轻重的老伙计，身家大概至少有五十万英镑，会真的为我考虑。我让他在走路当中停了下来，至少已经浪费了他三分钟时间，全是因为我几年前碰巧对自己做过的一句评价。我在他记忆里留下了印象，所以他愿意为我费上一点儿事，那正是我找工作所需要的。我敢说，就那同一天里，他已经炒了二十个人的鱿鱼。最后他说：

“你进保险公司怎么样？总是很有保障的，你也知道。人们总是需要保险，就像得吃饭一样。”

当然，我对进保险公司这个主意很感兴趣。约瑟夫爵士和飞火蛇保险公司有“利益关系”，天晓得他和多少间公司里都有“利益关系”。两个喽啰中的一位趋身递上便条簿，约瑟夫爵士从马甲口袋里掏出金笔，当场给我潦草地写了张给飞火蛇保险公司上层人物的一张便条。然后，我向他道了谢，他继续阔步前进。我从另一方向溜了出去，之后，我们再也没有见过面。

就这样，我得到了工作，要么像我在前面所说，工作得到了我。我已经在飞火蛇公司待了快十八年，一开始在办公室，现在干的是被称为“巡视员”的工作，有必要给别人留下深刻印象时，我就是个“代

表”。一星期有两天，我在管区办公室工作，其余时间我到处出差，去拜访当地代理提交上来名字的客户，给铺子及其他财产估价等，时不时自己也做几笔保险。我一星期挣七镑，正确地说，我这辈子就这样了。

回头看时，我意识到我有活力的日子——如果真的有——在我十六岁时就结束了，我真正关心过的一切都发生在那之前。当然，说起来，事情仍然在发生着——比如说战争——直到我在飞火蛇保险公司找到工作。从那往后——唉，就像他们所说的，快乐的人没有历史，对在保险公司工作的人也一样。那天往后，我的生活里没有一件事能正确地称之为大事，除了在差不多两年半后的一九二三年初，我结婚了。

十

当时我住在伊灵区⁷⁸的一间包膳食的宿舍里。岁月滚滚前行，或者说往前爬行。下宾菲尔德几乎被我置之脑后。我是那种在城里上班的普普通通的年轻人，早上抢着赶八点一刻的火车，谋算别人的工作。我在公司里颇受重用，对生活也比较满意。那种战后追求成功的热潮也多少感染了我。你也记得那都是怎么说的：政经计划，闯劲，坚毅，胆量，不出人头地就被淘汰，天高任鸟飞，是金子总会闪光等等。杂志上的广告画了一个伙计被老板拍肩膀，还有某个年富力强、能大把搂票子的经理级人物将其成功归因于函授课程。好笑的是我们都相信了，就连我这样的人也是，而那些对我可是一点儿也没用。因为我既不是干劲冲天，也不是个一蹶不振的人，从本质上说，我不会成为那两类人。可那就是当时的时代精神。出人头地！把握机会！看见谁倒台，在他爬起来之前赶紧再踩他两脚。不用说，这是在二十年代初，战争的后遗症已经消退，大衰退还没到来，而到来时，会要了我们的老命。

我是布茨图书馆的A级会员，去过门票为半克朗的舞会，还是本地网球俱乐部的会员。你也知道新兴郊区的那种网球俱乐部——小小的木亭子和高高的铁丝网，穿着做工很差的白色法兰绒衣服的伙计蹦

来跳去，模仿上等人喊“十五比四十”和“得优势分！79”，但是不算太过分。我学会了打网球，舞跳得不差，跟女孩相处也挺好。我快满三十岁了，红脸膛，黄油色头发，长相不算太差。在那年头，你要是打过仗，就能让你多一点儿优势。无论在当时还是现在，我从来没在外表上被人当作上等人，可是另一方面，你大概也不会把我当成乡镇上的店主之子。在像伊灵区这样很是鱼龙混杂的地方，我也能混得不差。在这里，办公室雇员阶层和普通专业人士阶层混杂在一起。我就是在网球俱乐部里碰到希尔达的。

当时，希尔达二十四岁。她个子小，身材单薄，是个胆怯的女孩。她长着黑头发，姿态优雅。因为她的眼睛很大，所以看起来很像兔子。她是那种一贯说话很少的人，这种人会在别人说话时偶尔插一句，给别人的印象是她一直在聆听。真要让她说什么时，总是那句：“哦，对，我也是这么想的。”总是同意最后发言那个人的意见，不管是谁。打网球时，她动作很优美地跳来跳去，打得也不算差。可是不知怎么，她有种无助加上小孩子的气质。她姓文森特。

你要是成了家，总有些时候你会自言自语：“我他妈干吗要结婚？”天晓得关于希尔达，我这样说了有多少次，太频繁了。再说一次吧，回头看看经过的十五年，我到底干吗要娶希尔达？

当然，部分原因是她年轻，而且说起来，她还很漂亮。除此之外，我只能说是因为她的家庭背景跟我的完全不一样，我要想了解她是什么样的人很不容易，只能先娶了她，然后才能了解她，而如果我娶了比如说爱尔西·沃特斯这种女孩，事先我就知道是跟什么样的人结婚。希尔达属于那种我只是道听途说了解不多的阶层：贫困的官员家庭。她们家过去几辈人里出过当兵的、水手、传教士、驻印度的英国官员等等。她家从来都没有钱，可是另一方面，她们家也从来没人从事过我认为是工作的营生。随你怎么说，那多少给人一种高人一等的感觉。你要是像我这样，属于虔敬上帝的店主阶层，属于去低教会派80教堂、用下午茶的阶层你就会理解。我现在不会有向往的感觉，可当时的确是。别误解我的意思，我不是说娶希尔达是因为她属于柜台那边由我为他们服务的阶层，想着去攀高枝，而只是因为我不了解

她，所以对她有种莫名其妙的感觉。有一点是我当时肯定不了解的，那就是对这种家里一贫如洗的女孩来说，随便哪个男人都愿意嫁，为的只是脱离那个家庭。

不久希尔达就带我去她家见她的家里人。直到那时，我才知道在伊灵区，有个不小的侨居过印度的英国人聚居地。那真像是发现了一个新世界！对我来说，算是大开眼界。

你知道那种侨居过印度的英国人家里是什么样吗？一踏进这些人的家里，你绝对不会想着外面的街上是英国，是二十世纪。你一跨进前门，就算到了印度，到了十九世纪八十年代。你也知道那种摆设：刻花柚木家具，铜制烟灰缸，墙上落满灰尘的老虎头盖骨，特里其雪茄，又红又辣的泡菜，戴着硬壳太阳帽伙计的发黄照片，指望你能理解其意思的兴都斯坦语单词，没完没了的猎虎逸事和一八八七年在浦那某某对某某说过的话等等⁸¹。那是他们所创造的，可以说属于他们自己的小小世界，就像医学上说的囊肿。当然，在我看来，一切都很有趣，从某些方面来说，还趣味盎然。希尔达她爸爸老文森特不仅去过印度，还去过别的稀奇古怪的地方，我忘了是婆罗洲还是沙捞越州⁸²。他长相普通，头发全无，长长的胡须几乎遮住了整张脸。他一肚子关于眼镜蛇和围腰布的故事，据他说，在一八九三年，他是某个地区的税务官兼地方行政长官。希尔达她妈妈面无人色，刚好跟墙上挂的褪色照片一样。她家还有个儿子，叫哈罗德，在锡兰⁸³当什么官员，我初识希尔达时，他在家休假。她家的房子是那种灰黑色的小房子，位于伊灵区的偏僻街道上，里面总是有特里其雪茄的气味，到处是长矛、吹箭筒、铜饰和野兽头骨等，让人几乎挪不动脚。

老文森特于一九一〇年退休，从那时起，他们老两口在精神和身体上都没有什么活动了，跟两只螺一样。可是在那时，我对她们家出过少校、上校甚至还出过一个上将这种事迹隐约有些向往。我对文森特一家以及他们对我的态度，有趣地说明了人们跟自己阶层以外的人打交道时，会怎样把自己变得愚蠢。把我放在一群商界人士当中——不管是公司经理，还是商品旅行推销员——我看到这些人时，会判断得八九不离十，然而我完全没有跟官员——吃租者——传教士阶层的人打

过交道，对这些败落的、被社会所弃的人，我有种向其顶礼膜拜的冲动。我把他们看作在社会和知识上比我高的阶层，另一方面，他们误以为我是冉冉上升的年轻商界中人，过不了多久，我就能大把大把搂票子。对他们那种人，“商业”，无论是从事海事保险还是卖花生的，都黑咕隆咚、秘不可测。他们只知道只要跟挣钱有关，都很庸俗。老文森特经常语气生动地说我“在商界”——我记得有次他一时漏嘴，说成了“在做买卖”——显而易见，他并未领会到在商界当雇员和自己做生意有何区别。他朦朦胧胧有种观念，就是我“在”飞火蛇保险公司，早晚我会一路被提拔，直到当上一把手。我觉得可能他自己脑子里有这么一种想法，就是在将来某一天，他会伸手向我要上五镑钱。哈罗德肯定这么想过，我从他眼神里就看出来了。事实上，即使我如今的收入就这么一点儿，哈罗德还活着的话，我大概还会借给他钱，好在我们结婚后没几年他就死了，得了伤寒什么的。老文森特夫妇也死了。

我跟希尔达结了婚，从一开始就搞砸了。那你为什么要娶她？你会问。可是你为什么跟你老婆结婚？这种事谁都会碰到。我不知道你会不会相信，结婚后头两三年里，我正儿八经想过把希尔达干掉。当然，实际上这种事情谁都不会干，只是喜欢想想而已，再者说，那些干掉老婆的伙计倒总会落网。不管你如何聪明地编造不在场证据，他们总一清二楚知道是你干的，不管怎么样，他们会归结到你身上。如果哪个女的给宰了，她丈夫总是头号嫌疑人——这也能让你多少了解一点儿人们对婚姻的真正看法如何。

时间一长，什么都习惯了。过一两年，我不再想着要干掉她，而是开始琢磨起她来，琢磨而已。有时候，在礼拜天下午或在平时我上班回来的晚上，我会脱鞋不脱衣服躺在床上琢磨女人，长达几个钟头。琢磨她们怎么会那样，为什么会变成那样，她们那样行事是不是故意的等等。女人结婚后马上变得不可收拾，速度之快让人吃惊不已，似乎她们铆足劲儿，就为的是结婚这一件事，在礼成的那一刻，她们就像已经撒下种子的花朵，蔫掉了。但真正让我失望的，是流露出的对生活提不起精神的态度。如果婚姻是桩明摆着的骗局——如果那个女人把你诱入其中后就转过身说：“听着，你这个杂种，我算是

逮着你了。今后你得给我干活，我可要去享受一把哩！”——那我倒不会介意，可完全不是这样。她们并不想享受一把，她们只是想能快地跨入中年。费尽九牛二虎之力把男人拖上圣坛⁸⁴后，她好像就放松下来了，所有青春、容貌、活力和生活乐趣一夜之间消失得无影无踪。希尔达就是这样。这就是那个曾经长得漂亮精致的女孩，在我眼里——事实上我刚认识她时，她的确如此——曾是比我更优秀的人物，但过了才三年左右，她就定型为一个意志消沉、了无生气的过时中年人物。我不否认她之所以变成那样，部分原因在我，但是不管她跟谁结婚，结果都会完全一样。

希尔达所缺少的——结婚后一星期我就发现的——是生活情趣，不会因为一件事有趣而对它感兴趣。对她来说，因为喜欢才去做什么的想法很难理解。通过希尔达，我才头一次了解到这种败落的中产阶级家庭究竟是什么样。关于他们，最基本的事实是他们的全部活力都被缺钱这件事榨干了。在那种家庭里，依靠微薄的退休金和年金——也就是说，所依靠的进款从来不会增长，通常还会越来越少——那种对贫困的感觉，决不浪费，一分钱掰成两半花的做法比任何农场干活的家里还要过分，更不要说跟我们这种家庭比起来了。希尔达经常告诉我她记得的第一种感觉，就是买什么都没钱的痛苦。不用说，在那种家庭，孩子都到了上学年龄时，正是经济最拮据的时候。结果这些孩子，特别是女孩子，长大后都有着根深蒂固的观念，即人活着总是大不易，勒紧裤腰带过日子才是本分。

一开始，我们住在一间狭小的公寓里，靠我的工资也能凑合过。后来我被调到西布莱奇里分公司后，情况好了些，希尔达的态度却仍是那样，总是说着关于钱的操心话，让人听着难受！牛奶账单！煤账单！我们俩过了一辈子，总是在听她那“下星期我们一家人就要进济贫院了”的老生常谈。一般说来，希尔达并不小气——在这个词的通常意义上——也根本不自私。但甚至在我们刚好有那么一点儿闲钱时，我也难得能劝动她去给自己买几件像样的衣服，她有种感觉，就是你应当让自己时时为缺钱而忧心忡忡，要从本分出发，制造出一种痛苦的气氛，我做不来。我对钱的态度更像那些一无所有的人。日子是让人过的，如果下星期会有大麻烦——咳，下星期还早着呢。真正

让她震惊的，是我拒绝操心这一事实，她总是在对我说：“可是乔治呀！你好像还没意识到！我们一点儿钱都没了！这很严重！”她喜欢为了这事那事“严重”而惊慌失措。近来，她有了种小把戏。在她忧心忡忡说着什么事时，会稍稍把肩膀耸起来，手抱在胸前。要是把希尔达每天所说的话都列出来，你会发现有三句会是并列第一：“我们买不起”，“这个买得很划算”和“我不知道钱从哪儿来”。她干什么事都是从反方面原因出发：她做糕点时，不会想着糕点如何，而只会想着怎样节省黄油和鸡蛋；我跟她睡觉时，她想的全是怎样避免怀上小孩；她去看电影，会一直为票价心疼肉疼，愤慨不已。她的持家之道，全部重心都在于“东西用到不能用为止”和“对付着用”，就是我妈见了也会大惊失色。另一方面，希尔达绝对不是个势利小人，她从来没有因为我不是个上等人而瞧不起我。与此相反，在她眼里，我的习惯太过贵族气了。我们每次去茶室，总免不了会压着嗓子大吵一架，只因为我给女服务员的小费太多了。很奇怪的是，在过去这几年里，在见识上，甚至在外表上，她变得比我还要中低阶层化一些，绝对如此。当然，她“攒钱”的事业从来置不下什么，从来不会。我们跟艾里斯米尔路上的别人生活得一样好或者一样差。但是她一刻不停地操心煤气费账单、牛奶账单、黄油的吓人价格、孩子们的靴子和学费等等，总是没个完，可以说已经成了她玩的一个游戏。

我们在一九二九年搬到了西布莱奇里，第二年开始买下艾里斯米尔路这座房子，就在比利出生前不久。被任命为巡视员后，我有更多时间离家在外，这给了我更多机会接近别的女人。当然，我不忠过——我不是说一直如此，但只要有机会我都会。很奇怪，希尔达吃醋了。从某种意义上说，考虑到这种事对她意义太小，我原以为她不会介意。像所有吃醋的女人一样，她有时表现出的诡计让我觉得不可能是她想出来的。有时候，她拿获我的方式让我几乎相信有心灵感应这一说。不过她在我有那事没那事时，总是一样怀疑我，我多少说来总是被怀疑。老天作证，过去几年——总之在过去五年里——我可够清白了。你要是胖得像我这样，想不清白都难啊。

但是总而言之，我认为跟艾里斯米尔路上一半左右的夫妇比起来，我和希尔达相处得不会比他们更糟糕。有过几次我想过分居或者

离婚，但是在我们这一行不会那样做，负担不起。而且，随着时间推移，你多少会放弃斗争。如果已经跟一个女人过了十五年，没有她的日子难以想象，她是生活秩序中的一部分。我敢说，你可能对太阳、月亮都有理由看不顺眼，可是你真的想把它们换掉吗？再说还有孩子，孩子是“纽带”，人们这样说，要么说是个“结”，可就不说是铅球加镣铐。

这两年，希尔达有了两位肺腑之交，一个叫威勒太太，一个叫明斯小姐。威勒太太是个寡妇，我推测她对男性深恶痛绝。要是我进屋的次数多了，我能感觉到她好像不情愿得全身发抖。她是个没多少颜色的小个子妇女，这会让人心生好奇，猜想她浑身上下是否全是那种灰白的尘土色，她却浑身是劲。她对希尔达影响不好，因为她有着同样的“攒钱”和“东西用到不能用为止”的热忱，方式却有些不同。她这个人别有想法，认为总可以不掏钱享受一把。她老是在打听哪里有大减价和免费娱乐。对这种人来说，是不是真的想买什么倒他妈无关紧要，问题只是要买得便宜。大商店清仓处理货物时，威勒太太总是排队排在头一名。她最得意的，就是在各个柜台之间拼搏一天后，什么也没买走。明斯小姐跟她们很不一样，她是个悲惨的典型。可怜的明斯小姐。她又高又瘦，三十八岁左右，头发颜色黑漆漆的，脸保养得很好，有种易于轻信的表情。她靠着某种微薄的固定收入生活，年金之类，我猜想她是西布莱奇里发展成郊区前还是个小农村镇子时那个旧社会的遗留物。她爸是个牧师，活着时把她管教得喘不过气，全在她脸上写着呢。她们是中产阶级特殊的副产品，这些女人甚至在逃脱家庭之前，就已经变成了缺神少气的老娘儿们。可怜的明斯老小姐，尽管她脸上皱纹不少，看上去还跟个小孩一模一样。她仍然把上教堂视为极为重要之事，总在嘟囔着“现代化进程”和“妇女运动”的事。她也朦朦胧胧地向往去做点儿她称为“长见识”的事，只是不太清楚从何入手。我觉得纯粹是独身孤单的原因，她才会喜欢上希尔达和威勒太太，但是现在她们去哪里都会带着她。

她们聚到一起时，这仨人！有时候我简直要羡慕她们。威勒太太是领头的，没一样蠢事她不会拉着她们去干，要么这会儿，要么那会儿。任何事，从神智学⁸⁵到翻绳游戏，条件是不花或者少花钱。有几

个月，她们迷上了偏门食品之类。威勒太太捡了本名为《容光焕发》的旧书，里面论证人应该吃莴苣和其他不花钱的东西。不用说，这很对希尔达的胃口，她立马把自己饿上了，她还想推广到我和孩子们身上，只是遭到我坚决抵制。然后她们对信念疗法又迷了一阵，接着又想打佩尔曼教育研究院⁸⁶的主意，但在通了很多封信后，才发现没法得到免费的小册子。那也是威勒太太的主意。然后是干草暖箱⁸⁷烹调法。接着是某种脏乎乎的蜜蜂酒，据说能不花一分钱地用水做，她们在报纸上读到一篇文章说蜜蜂酒能致癌时就罢手了。然后她们差点儿参加了一个妇女俱乐部，可以参加一次游览，巡回于各工厂之间，有人带队，但是威勒太太加减乘除地盘算半天后，认为工厂提供的免费茶点的价值跟会费相比，还差那么一点儿。下一项是威勒太太攀上一个熟人，此人派发一些由某个舞台表演团体之类所制作的戏剧戏票。据我所知，她们仨几个钟头坐着看一出趣味高雅的戏剧，可她们甚至都不想装作听明白了——看完后甚至说不出戏剧的名字——但她们的感觉是不花钱就得到了什么东西。有一次，她们甚至信起了招魂术。威勒太太碰到一个穷困潦倒的灵媒，此人穷到了家，甚至给他十八便士就能做一台降神会。这样，她们三个每人花六便士就能瞅一眼彼界。有次他到我家做降神会时我见到了他。他是个脏兮兮的老混蛋，而且显然怕神学博士怕得要命。他身子哆嗦得在门厅里脱大衣时，从裤腿里掉下一卷裹黄油的布，我塞回给他，没让那几个女的看到。有人跟我说过裹黄油的布是用来做灵的外质⁸⁸，我想他是还要去做下一场降神会。花十八便士是看不到显灵的。近几年威勒太太最大的发现，是左派读书会。我想是在一九三六年，左派读书会才发展到了西布莱奇里。我很快就加入了，这几乎是我所记得的唯一一次花钱而没有遭到希尔达抗议。在那里，能以原价的三分之一买到书，让她觉得可以接受。这些女人的态度耐人寻味，真的。当然，明斯小姐试过读那些书中的一两本，另两位却压根就没想过，她们跟左派读书会从来没有任何直接关系，也根本不知道是干吗的——事实上，我相信一开始，威勒太太还以为它跟人们忘在火车上的书有关⁸⁹，而那些书被便宜处理了。她们的确知道的，加入左派读书会意味着花两个半先令，就能买到原价七先令六便士的书，所以她们总在说这是个“真不错的主意”。时不时，本地的左派读书分会开会，请一些人来讲话，

每次威勒太太总是拉着另外两位一起去，她是个不管内容为何，逢会议必积极参加的人，条件是在室内，还得免费。她们仨坐在那里，就像三块布丁。她们不知道开会是关于什么的，也不关心，但她们有种朦朦胧胧的感觉，特别是明斯小姐，那就是她们在长见识，而且一分钱都不用花。

你看，这就是希尔达，你明白她是什么样的人了吧。大体上说，我想她不会比我更差劲。我们刚结婚后，有时候我想掐死她，但后来我变得无所谓。然后就是我长胖了，心也定了下来。我肯定是在一九三〇年胖起来的，来得如此迅速，就像一发炮弹打中我后卡在体内，你也知道那是什么感觉。前一天夜里上床时，还感觉多少还年轻，还对女的有想法什么的，第二天早晨一觉醒来，就清清楚楚地意识到自己不过是个可怜的老胖子，往前看除了进坟墓就没什么指望了，只能拼了老命干活，好挣钱给孩子们买靴子穿。

现在是一九三八年，在世界上的每座船坞里，人们正在为下一次战争建造军舰，而我碰巧在海报上看到的一个名字，却让我想起成箩成筐的东西来，天晓得这些在多少年前就应该埋葬掉的。

第三部

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那天晚上回到家后，我还在想那十七镑该怎么花。

希尔达说她要去左派读书会开会，好像有个伦敦来的人要演讲，可是不用说希尔达不晓得演讲是关于什么的，我跟她说我要跟她一起去。总的说来，我并不是个喜欢听演讲的人，可是那天上午从看到轰炸机飞过头顶时开始，我脑子里关于战争的图像让我有点儿思来想去。照例费了番口舌让两个孩子比平时早点儿上床后，我们赶着准点出门去听演讲，预定时间为八点钟。

那天晚上有些雾蒙蒙的，会堂里又冷又光线不足。那是一座木结构的小会堂，锡皮屋顶，是某个非国教派之类的财产，花十先令就能租用一次。当时已经到了十五六个人，跟平时的人数差不多。讲台前有个黄色告示牌上写着演讲题目为“法西斯之威胁”，我看到时根本没有感到吃惊。威彻特先生在这种会议上担任主持人，非公职时间里，他在一间建筑师办公室担任某职务。那会儿，他正领着演讲者来回走动，向每个人介绍他是某某先生（我忘了他叫什么），“著名反法西斯主义者”，很像称某某为“著名钢琴家”。那个演讲者是个四十岁上下的小个子，穿着黑套装，秃顶，他想用几缕头发来遮盖，反而欲掩弥彰。

这种会议从来不会准时开始，总是会拖上一阵子，装作说不准还会来几个人。八点二十左右，威彻特敲了敲桌子又开始他那一套。威彻特是个面色和善的伙计，脸皮粉红，就像小孩屁股那种颜色，而且总是面带笑容。我想他是本地自由党的书记，也是教区理事会里的一员，还在圣母联合会的幻灯讲座上当司仪，他可以说是那种天生当主持人的料。他说我们都很高兴请到了某某先生前来演讲时，可以看得

出他确实感觉如此。我每次看着他，心里总不免想着他大概还是个处男呢。小个子演讲者拿出一沓纸片，主要是剪报，他用玻璃水杯压住，然后飞快地舔了下嘴唇就开讲了。

你有没有去听过演讲、集会或者别的之类？

我亲自去听一次时，那天晚上肯定有一阵子不由自主会想到同一个问题：我们究竟他妈的干吗要这么做？大家怎么会在冬天的晚上出门听这玩意儿？我用眼睛扫了一圈会堂里面。我坐的地方在后排，就我所记得的，在这种集会上，只要有可能，我一定会坐在后排。希尔达和另外两位跟通常一样，又凑在前排。会堂又小又压抑，你也知道那种地方：油松木的墙，波纹铁屋顶，过堂风大得让人想捂上大衣。我们一小撮人坐在讲台旁边的灯光底下，后面有差不多三十排空椅子，椅子上全落着灰。演讲者后面的讲台上，有个用防尘罩盖着的形状巨大、四四方方的东西，说是一口盖着棺罩的特大号棺材也能让人信，实际上那是钢琴。

一开始我没怎么听。演讲者是个长相很猥琐的小个子，不过演讲得不错。脸白白的，嘴皮子很利索，声音很尖，是从不断讲话中磨炼出来的。不用说，他正在猛烈抨击希特勒和纳粹党。我没有怎么认真听他讲话——反正也能从每天早上的《新闻报》上看到——但是在我听来，他的声音里好像带着舌颤音，时不时有一两个词迸出来吸引了我的注意。

“兽行……骇人听闻的虐待狂大爆发……胶皮警棍……集中营……对犹太人惨无人道的迫害……回到黑暗时代……欧洲文明……防患于未然……正派人的愤慨……民主国家联盟……坚定立场……保卫民主……民主……法西斯……民主……法西斯……民主……法西斯……民主……”

你也知道那种讲话，这些伙计能把那些话反刍一样成小时地讲下去，就像留声机，扳过唱针臂，按一个键就开始了。民主，法西斯，民主。但不知怎么，我觉得看着挺有趣。这个长相猥琐的小个子，脸白，头秃，站在讲台上喷射着标语口号。他在干吗？居心明显，在大

张旗鼓地煽动仇恨。他用尽九牛二虎之力，想要你去仇恨被称为纳粹的外国人。我觉得让人称为“某某先生，著名反法西斯主义者”是件莫名其妙的事。反法西斯主义者，莫名其妙的行当。我估计这位老兄靠的就是撰写反希特勒的书过日子，可是希特勒出现之前他在干吗？有一天希特勒没了他又会干吗？当然，这些问题也适用于医生、侦探、捕鼠人之流。可是当那刺耳的声音讲啊讲啊，我突然又有了另外的想法，就是他把自己的话都当真，一点儿都不是装出来的——他对自己所讲的每个词都有切身感受。跟他自身感到的仇恨相比，他想在听众中煽动起来的仇恨就是小意思了。对他来说，每句标语都像福音书一样真实。如果把他开了膛，你会发现里面会是民主—法西斯—民主。私下认识这么个伙计倒挺有趣，可是他有没有私下的生活？要么他只是从一个讲台赶到另一个讲台，不停地煽动仇恨？也许连他做的梦都是标语呢。

我坐在后排，能看到别的听众。我觉得——如果你琢磨一下的话，也会这样觉得——我们大家在这个冬天的晚上出门，坐在刮着过堂风的会堂里，听左派读书会的演讲（我认为我有资格使用“大家”这个词，因为这次我的确来了），此事具有某种意义。我们是西布莱奇的革命派，不过头一眼看上去没什么希望。我眼睛扫过听众时，吃惊地发现尽管演讲者已经花了超过半个钟头时间猛烈抨击希特勒及纳粹，但只有五六个人真正听明白了演讲者在说什么。在这种会议上，总是会出现类似情况，没有例外，一半人听完后，对讲的是什么仍茫然无知。威彻特坐在桌子边的椅子上，一脸开心地看演讲者，他的脸有些像是一朵粉红色天竺葵。你可以提前听到演讲者一坐下他就会讲的话——跟他在为美拉尼西亚人⁹⁰募捐裤子而举办的幻灯讲座结束时说的一样：“我们表示感谢——带给我们很多思考——一个鼓舞人心的晚上！”明斯小姐在第一排，身子坐得挺直，头稍稍偏向一侧，就像一只小鸟。演讲者从玻璃杯子下面拿起一张纸，念着德国人自杀率的统计数字。你可以从明斯小姐又细又长的脖子上判断出她感到不开心。这能让她长见识吗？难道不能？她能理解都是关于什么的就好了！另外两位坐在那里像是两团布丁。挨着她们的，是个红头发小个子女人，正在织一件套衫。一针平织，两针反织，退一针，然后把

两针串起来。演讲者正在描述纳粹怎样把人脑袋剃下来，有时候刽子手枪法很糟糕。听众中间还有个女的，一个黑头发女孩，是郡立学校的老师。跟别人不一样，她是真的在听，身子坐得前倾，一双又大又圆的眼睛盯着演讲者，嘴巴还稍稍张着，把话语一饮而下。

紧挨她后面坐着的，是来自本地工党的两个老头，一个头发灰白，剃得很短，另一个是个秃头，长着耷拉胡子。他们两位都穿着大衣，你也知道那种类型的人：他们年纪轻轻就加入了工党，二十年时间里，上了雇主们的黑名单，另外十年纠缠着郡政务委员会要求改进贫民区状况。突然之间全变了，老工党的那套玩意儿无关紧要了，他们发现自己被推到了国际政治问题面前——希特勒，斯大林，炸弹，机关枪，胶皮警棍，罗马—柏林轴心，人民阵线⁹¹，《反共产国际协定》等等，他们摸不着头脑。就在我跟前的，是本地共产党支部，他们三个都很年轻，其中一个是有钱人，是赫斯派莱兹住宅公司里的什么人，事实上，我相信他是老克拉姆的侄子。另一个是某家银行的职员，他有时为我兑换支票。剩下的是个不错的小伙子，圆脸，看上去很年轻，表情很热切，眼睛蓝得像个婴儿的一样，头发颜色浅得会让你以为漂白过。他看上去只有十七岁左右，可是我想他有二十岁了。他穿着廉价蓝套装，领带是天蓝色的，跟他的头发倒相配。挨着这三个人坐的，还有另外一个共产党。但这位好像是另外一种共产党，跟他们不全是一路人，因为他是被另外几个称为托派分子⁹²的那种，他们看不起他。这个小伙子甚至还要更年轻些，非常瘦削，肤色很黑，一脸紧张之相。他脸庞清秀，不用说是个犹太人。这四个人对演讲的态度和别的人很不一样，看得出到了提问时间，他们马上就会站起来提问，也能看出他们已经在扭来扭去了。那个小托派分子磨着屁股挪来挪去，急不可待要抢在头一个提问。

我已经没在听具体演讲内容，没有一个字一个字听演讲了，但听的方式不止一种。我把眼闭上一会儿，因而产生了一种奇特的效果。只听到他的声音时，好像能把他看得更清楚。

听起来，那种声音好像能不歇气地说上两星期。让这架人体手摇风琴成小时地向你射着宣传的话，实在是件很腻味的事，真的。同样

的东西说了一遍又一遍：仇恨，仇恨，仇恨，让我们团结一致好好仇恨。一遍又一遍，它给你一种感觉，似乎有什么东西进到你的脑瓜里砸着你的脑子。但在我闭上眼的那会儿，我成功扭转了局势：我进入了他的脑瓜，那是种非凡的快感。有一秒钟，我进去了，你几乎可以说我就是他。不管怎样，我感到了他所感到的。

我看到了他所看到的景象，跟能用言语形容出的完全不一样。他嘴里只是说希特勒是冲我们来的，我们必须团结起来好好仇恨。不说细节，根本不失体面。然而他看到的很不一样，那是他自己拿扳手砸人脸的景象，砸的当然是法西斯的脸，我知道他看到的就是那个，那就是我想象自己有一两分钟在他脑瓜里所看到的。砸！就往脸正中央砸！骨头像蛋壳一样碎掉了，一分钟前还是张人脸，这会儿已经变成一大摊草莓酱。砸！又来一个！那就是他脑子里所想的，不管走路还是睡觉，他越想越喜欢。都OK，因为被砸的脸是属于法西斯的。那些全能从他的语气中听出来。

可那是为什么？最有可能的解释，是他被吓坏了。如今每个能思考的人全被吓得手脚冰凉，这位伙计不过是有足够的远见，所以比别人更害怕。希特勒是冲我们来的！快！让我们抓个扳手团结起来，要是我们砸人脸砸得够多，他们就砸不成我们的脸。结成伙，选出领头的。希特勒是黑色的，斯大林是白色的，两个人换过来说也行，因为在小人物的眼里，希特勒和斯大林都一样，都意味着扳手和砸人脸。

战争！我又开始想起了它，毫无疑问，它是要来了。可是谁害怕战争？也就是说，谁害怕炸弹和机关枪？“你”，你会说。对，我会，见识过战争的人都会。不过要紧的不是战争，而是战后，是我们即将坠入其中的世界，那种仇恨世界，标语世界。囚衣，带刺铁丝网，胶皮警棍，秘密牢房里日夜不熄的灯泡，你睡觉时盯着你的侦探，还有游行和印着硕大脸庞的海报；上百万人全为了领袖而欢呼，直到他们愚弄了自己，以为自己真的崇拜他。私下里，他们却一直仇恨他，恨得简直要呕吐。那些都会来吗？不会吗？有些日子里我知道绝无可能，别的日子我知道是在劫难逃。但不管怎么说，那天晚上我知道是会来的，全表现在小个子演讲者的声音里了。

说到底，对冬夜出来听演讲的为数少得可怜的那群人来说，那也许的确有意义，或者不管怎么样，对五六个听懂了是怎么回事的人是如此。他们不过是一支庞大军队的前哨，是具有远见的一群，是最先发现船就要沉的一群老鼠。快，快！法西斯就要来了！伙计们，拿好扳手！砸他们的脸，否则他们就要来砸你。前景把我们吓得够戗，以至于我们马上投身其中，就像一只兔子跳进一条大蟒蛇的喉咙。

那么，如果英国来了法西斯，像我这样的伙计又会怎样？事实上，很可能没有丝毫不同。至于演讲者和听众中的四个共产党嘛，没错，对他们来说太不一样了。他们会去砸别人的脸，要么他们自己的脸被砸，取决于谁将取胜。但对于我这样普普通通、中不溜秋的伙计来说，以前怎么个活法，还会继续怎样活下去。可是那也吓坏了我——跟你说，我真的被吓坏了。演讲者住了口坐下来时，我才开始琢磨起那是为什么。

照例响起一阵稀里哗啦的掌声，听众只有十五个人左右时就会那样。然后威彻特老兄讲了他那一套话，还没到提问时间呢，那四个共产党便齐刷刷地站了起来。他们激烈斗嘴斗了十分钟左右，说的全是一大堆别人听不懂的东西，例如辩证唯物主义、无产阶级的命运以及列宁在一九一八年说过的话等等。然后，演讲者喝完一杯水后站起来总结了一番，让那个托派分子在椅子上扭动着，另外三个人却听得高兴。他们私底下又斗了一会儿嘴，别的人谁也没能说上话。希尔达和另外两位在演讲结束后马上就走掉了，大概她们害怕会有人来为场租让她们凑钱。小个子女人留下来要把那一行毛线打完，我能听到她在别人争辩时数着针数。威彻特坐在那里，对每个说话的人都奉上一副笑脸，看得出他正在想这真是太有趣了，脑子里还做着记录。黑头发女孩把人看了一个又看下一个，嘴巴微微张着。那个老工党，他的耷拉胡子和围到耳朵的大衣让他看着像是只海狮。他坐在那里仰视着他们，在琢磨到底他妈的都在吵什么。最后，我起身开始穿上大衣。

斗嘴变成小托派分子和长了一头漂亮头发的小伙子的单挑，他们在争论战争爆发的话，该不该参军。我斜着身子顺着那一排椅子走出去时，长着漂亮头发的那位向我求援：

“保灵先生！你看，如果战争爆发，而我们有机会把法西斯主义一次性摧毁的话，你会不会去打仗？我是说如果你年轻的话。”

我想他以为我有六十岁了。

“你可以肯定我不会，”我说，“上次我已经打够了。”

“可这是去消灭法西斯主义啊！”

“噢，狗屁法西斯主义！如果你问我，我得说消灭什么的这种事儿，已经做得够多的啦。”

小托派分子插话说什么社会爱国主义和对工人的背叛等等，但是另一位打断了他。

“可你想着的是一九一四年，那不过是普普通通的帝国主义战争，这次不一样。你看，要是你听说在德国发生的事：集中营，纳粹用胶皮警棍打人，还有强迫犹太人互相往脸上吐口水——难道不能让你热血沸腾？”

他们总在说什么热血沸腾的事，我记得在战争期间，总是能听到这个词。

“我在一九一六年就不再沸腾了，”我告诉他，“你要是闻过战壕里的气味，就不会再沸腾了。”

突然，我好像看到了他，似乎直到那会儿之前，我都没怎么好好看过他。

那是一张很年轻的脸，应该属于一个很帅的在上学的小伙子。他的眼睛是蓝色的，亚麻色头发。他盯着我的眼睛看，有那么一阵子，他的眼里真的有了泪水！就因为德国犹太人的事，让他有了如此强烈的感受！但事实上，我完全了解他的感受。他是个大块头小伙子，可能还代表银行踢橄榄球，而且有头脑。那就是他，位于丑陋郊区银行里的职员，坐在毛玻璃窗户下往分类账里填数字，点一堆堆钞票，拍

经理的马屁，感到他的生命在一天天腐朽下去。突然，欧洲大陆那边有了天大的事情。炮弹在战壕上爆炸，步兵一波波在硝烟中发起攻击，大概他就有几个好朋友正在西班牙打仗。不用说，他热切盼望战争的到来，可是你能怪他吗？有那么一会儿，我奇怪地觉得他是我的儿子，事实上再过几年，我的儿子也许就是那个样。我想到那个八月里热得难受的一天，报童贴出了“英国对德国宣战”的海报，还有我们系着白围裙冲到人行道上欢呼的事。

“听着，孩子，”我说，“你全搞错了。一九一四年时，我们觉得那是桩挺光荣的事，结果呢，不是，无非是个操蛋的烂摊子而已。要是战争再打起来，你别参加。你为什么要让自己的身体去挨枪子儿？还是留给女孩子吧。你以为战争全是英雄主义和志愿军冲锋什么的，可是我告诉你，不是那样。如今不会再有拼刺刀的事，就算有，也跟你想象的不一样。你不会觉着自己像个英雄，你知道的，只是三天三夜睡不着觉，身上臭得跟黄鼠狼似的。你会吓得尿裤子，手也冻得连步枪都握不住。不过那也他妈不要紧，要紧的是战后的事。”

不用说，他听不进去，他们只是觉得我落伍了，我还不如去妓院门口散发劝人改过的传单呢。

人们开始散了。威彻特把演讲者带回家，那三个共产党和小犹太人一块儿走，他们又说起无产阶级团结一致、辩证法之辩证法以及托洛茨基在一九一七年说了什么之类。他们全是一路货，真的。那是个潮湿、宁静、漆黑的夜晚，街灯吊在夜空中像是星星，却照不亮路面。远处，能听到无轨电车沿着大街轰轰烈烈地开。我想喝上一杯，可是最近的酒馆在半英里之外。另外，我还想找个人谈谈，以别的方式谈，那没法在酒馆里进行。真有趣，我的脑子已经转动了一整天，部分是因为不用工作，这是当然的，另一部分原因是我的新假牙，它把我的精神提起来了一点儿。那一整天，我都在为前景和往事想来想去，我想跟人谈谈要么会来、要么不会来的坏日子、标语、囚衣和东欧最新类型的人，他们要把英国揍成斗鸡眼。我根本没指望能跟希尔达谈这些。我突然想到可以去拜访一下波提欧斯老先生，他是我的朋友，睡得很晚。

波提欧斯是位退休的公学教师，住在楼房里，幸好在不高的楼层，位置在原先的老镇子，教堂旁边。不用说，他是个单身汉。你想象不出他那种人会结婚，他只跟他的书本和烟斗为伴，有个女的来给他做家务。他是位博学的伙计，懂得希腊语、拉丁语和诗歌什么的。我想如果说本地左派读书俱乐部分部代表的是“进步”，波提欧斯老先生则代表了“文化”，可是这两样在西布莱奇里都不怎么吃得开。

那间小屋里亮着灯，波提欧斯老先生在读书，他睡得很晚。我敲了敲前门以后，他跟往常一样踱了出来，用牙咬着烟斗，手指夹在书里刚读到的地方。他是个长得很抢眼的家伙，个头很高，头发灰白而卷曲，脸庞瘦削，表情如在梦中，有点儿褪色的样子。虽然他肯定快六十岁了，那张脸却几乎跟个小孩的差不多。这种公学和大学里的伙计中有一些能让自己直到临死那天看起来都像是个小孩，这有些不寻常，跟他们的某些动作有关。波提欧斯老先生习惯于来回踱着步子，他那颗长着鬃头发的漂亮头颅有点儿往后仰着，让人觉得他一直在梦着一首诗什么的，意识不到周围的事。你一看到他，就能看出他这辈子是怎么过来的，全反映在他外表上了。上公学、牛津大学，然后回到原来的公学当老师，一辈子生活在拉丁语、希腊语和板球的氛围里。他什么怪毛病都有，总是穿一件哈里斯牌粗花呢旧夹克和灰色旧法兰绒裤子，你如果说那“有失身份”，他还挺乐意。他抽烟斗，看不起烟卷。尽管半夜才睡，可我不敢打赌他每天早晨还要冲个凉水澡呢。我想在他眼里我有点儿俗气。我没上过公学，不懂拉丁语也根本不想去学。他有时说我“对美感觉迟钝”是个遗憾，我想那是说我没文化的一种客气讲法。但是不管怎么样，我喜欢他。他很好客，程度恰到好处。他总是乐于请你进屋聊上几个钟头，而且酒瓶总是就在手边。如果你住在像我们家那样女人和小孩有些泛滥成灾的地方，偶尔出去一下，到那种单身汉的氛围里待一待有好处。那是种书本、烟斗加壁炉的氛围，还有典型的牛津大学的感觉，即除了书本、诗歌、希腊雕像，别的什么都不重要，自从哥特人洗劫罗马⁹³以来发生的所有事情都不值一提——有时那也不失是种安慰。

他推着我坐到壁炉边的一把旧皮扶手椅里，还倒了些威士忌和苏打水。我从来没见过他的房间内什么时候不是烟雾缭绕。天花板几乎

全黑了，房间有点儿小，除了门、窗和壁炉边那块地方，四面墙从地板到天花板全是书。壁炉台上，全是些意料之中的东西：一排全是脏乎乎的老树根烟斗，几个希腊银币，一个上面有波提欧斯老先生所上学院纹章的烟丝罐，还有几盏小的陶制灯，他跟我说过那是他在西西里岛的某座山上挖出来的。壁炉台上方，有几张希腊雕像的照片，中间是张大的，上面是个长着翅膀、没有头的女人，似乎正要迈步去赶公共汽车。我第一次看到它时不怎么会说话，问他为什么他们不往上面安个脑袋，我记得波提欧斯老先生当时无比震惊的样子。

波提欧斯开始用壁炉台上那个罐里的烟丝给烟斗装上。

“楼上那个让人受不了的女人买了台无线电⁹⁴，”他说，“我一直希望一辈子再也别听到那玩意儿。我想是拿那个没办法了。你也许知道法律上是怎么说的？”

我告诉他的确拿那个没办法。我很喜欢他说“受不了”一词里的牛津味，而且发现在一九三八年还有人反对在家里开收音机，也让我觉得挺滑稽。波提欧斯又以他那种梦游般的样子踱来踱去，手揣在外套口袋里，用牙齿咬着烟斗。几乎没打顿，他开始跟我说起在伯利克里⁹⁵统治期间，雅典所通过的某部针对乐器的法律。波提欧斯老先生总是那样，他说起的，全是发生在好多世纪以前的事。无论你提起什么，他总能说回到雕像、诗歌以及希腊人、罗马人。你要是提起玛丽女王，他会开始跟你说起腓尼基⁹⁶的三层船。他从来不读当代的书，拒绝知道那些书名，除了《泰晤士报》，别的报纸都不看。他还会得意地说他从来没看过电影。除了像济慈和华兹华斯少数几个诗人，他认为当代世界——在他看来，当代世界指过去的两千年——根本不当存在。

我自己便是当代世界的一部分，可是我喜欢听他说话。他在书架边踱着步子，抽出一本又一本书，不时在小口抽烟的间隙给我读上一段，通常还得是从原文拉丁语或读到的别的什么语言翻译过来。全是让人心平气和、感觉愉快的东西。他有点儿像是位老师，但是不知怎么，能让你得到安慰。我在听着时，就不再处于那有着电车、煤气账

单和保险公司的同一个世界了，而所在的世界里全是庙堂和橄榄树，孔雀和大象，角斗场上拿着扑网、三股叉的伙计，长翅膀的狮子，太监，战舰，投石机，穿着铜甲胄策马跃过士兵们的盾牌的将军。他竟会喜欢我这样的伙计，这有点儿古怪，可这也是长得胖的好处之一，我能跟任何阶层的人打成一片。再说，在喜欢黄色故事这一点上，我们有共同点，那是他喜欢的一件当代之事，可他总是要提醒我黄色故事并非当代独有。他在这一点上很有老处女的样子，总是半遮半掩地讲。有时他会提起一位拉丁语诗人，翻译一段淫秽的押韵诗，还留下很多空白供我想象。要么他会暗示一点儿罗马皇帝的私生活，还有在阿思脱雷思⁹⁷庙里所发生的事。希腊人和罗马人好像都不是什么好东西。波提欧斯老先生还有一些意大利某处壁画的照片，能让你看了后想入非非。

在我受够工作和家庭生活时，跟波提欧斯聊上一聊对我大有好处，但那天晚上好像不是这么回事。我脑子里还在想那一整天都在想的事，就像我对那个左派读书俱乐部的演讲者那样，我也没有专心听波提欧斯在说什么，只是听着他的声音。但那个演讲者的声音进入了我的内心，波提欧斯老先生的没有。它太平和、太有牛津味了。最后，在他在说什么时，我插了句嘴：

“告诉我，波提欧斯，你怎么看待希特勒？”

波提欧斯老先生正在用肘部搭着壁炉台，脚蹬着挡板，硕长的身体斜靠在那里，又不失优雅。听到我的话，他吃惊得几乎要把烟斗从嘴里取出来。

“希特勒？那个德国佬？我亲爱的朋友啊！我没怎么看待他。”

“但问题是，他操蛋得很有可能让我们在他完蛋之前好好看待他。”

他听到“操蛋”吓了一跳，他不喜欢那个词，可是当然，他的姿态上从来不怎么流露出震惊。他又开始走来走去，嘴里喷着烟。

“我看不出有任何理由要关注他，不过是个冒险家，这种人来了又去。蜉蝣一世，绝对是蜉蝣一世。”

我不能肯定“蜉蝣一世”是什么意思，可我坚持自己的观点：

“我觉得你搞错了，希特勒这家伙跟别人不一样，斯大林也是。他们不像古代那些伙计，把人钉十字架、砍人头之类的只是为了开心，他们的目标前所未有——闻所未闻。”

“我亲爱的朋友！‘太阳底下无新事’。”

当然，那是老波提欧斯最爱说的一句谚语。他听不进去有任何新的东西存在。你告诉他如今的什么事，他马上会告诉你在某某国王治下，发生过一模一样的事。就算你提起飞机这种东西，他也会告诉你在克里特岛或者迈锡尼⁹⁸或者别的什么地方，很可能早就有了。我想跟他解释我在听那个小个子家伙演讲时所感到的，以及我看到的坏日子即将到来的景象，可他不听，只是重复说太阳底下无新事。最后，他从书架里抽出一本书，给我读一段关于公元前某个希腊暴君的事，此人跟希特勒差不多算是孪生兄弟。

我们又争论了一会儿。一整天，我都想跟人聊聊这件事。真是古怪。我不是个蠢人，但也不是个趣味高雅之士。老天为证，平时，你觉得一个人到中年、一星期挣七镑、有两个孩子的人不可能有的兴趣，我也不会有。但是，我又有足够的识别力，知道我们所习惯的旧生活方式已被连根锯断，我能感到这正在发生。我能看到战争正在逼近，也能看到战后的景象：领食物的队伍，秘密警察，还有告诉你该怎样思考的大喇叭。但又不是单单我一个，像我这样想的还有上百万人。我到处遇到的普通人、在酒馆里遇到的伙计、开公共汽车的、五金公司的旅行推销员这些人都有同一种感觉，就是这个世界出毛病了，他们能感到脚下的一切正在分崩离析。可是这里还有位博学之士，一辈子跟书本生活，让自己沉浸在历史中，直到最后从毛孔往外淌的都是历史，他根本看不到世界在变化。他认为希特勒无关紧要，拒绝相信下一场战争正在逼近。不管怎么样，因为上次战争他没有参加，所以在他心里没留下多少印象——他觉得那跟特洛伊之围比起

来，根本就不入流。他看不出人们为什么要为标语、大喇叭和囚衣操心。什么样的智识人士会注意到那些？他总是那样说。希特勒和斯大林会消失，但波提欧斯老先生所说的“基本道德准则”不会消失。不用说，这不过是换了一种说法，指世间万物会完全按照他已经知道的方式运行。永永远远，有教养的牛津毕业生会在全是书本的书房里踱来踱去，引用拉丁文句，抽带有纹章罐子里装的好烟丝。跟他聊是没用的，真的，跟那个长着亚麻色头发的小伙子聊收获都会多些。渐渐地，我们的谈话又转了向，转到公元前所发生的事，总会那样。然后谈话又转到诗歌上。最后，波提欧斯老先生从书架上抽出一本书，开始读济慈的《夜莺颂》（要是说云雀吧——我忘了）。

就我这个人来说，很长时间才会读上一点儿诗，但说来奇怪的是，我喜欢听波提欧斯老先生大声读诗。毫无疑问他读得很好，当然，他读诗成了习惯——以前给一个班的男生读过诗。他会懒洋洋地靠着什么东西，牙咬着烟斗，喷着小股烟雾。他的声音很庄重，而且随着诗行抑扬顿挫。看得出在某种意义上，读诗让他感动。我不知道诗为何物，有何功用，我想它对某些人有种精神上的效用，就像音乐对于另外有些人一样。他在读着时，我没有真正在听，也就是说，我没有听进去，但那种声音给我心里带来一种平和的感觉。总的说来，我喜欢，但是那天晚上似乎没效果，像是有阵冷风吹进了房间，我只感到那些全是废话。诗歌！是什么？无非是个声音，空气中的一股旋风。我的天！那跟机关枪相比又顶什么用？

我看他靠着书架。真是古怪啊，这些公学里的伙计，一辈子都是校童，全部生活都围绕着母校和那点儿拉丁语、希腊语及诗歌。突然我想起来了，差不多是我第一次来这里找波提欧斯时，他给我读了同样一首诗，用同样的语气读过，读到同一段时，他的声音发颤——那是关于魔法窗或者别的一段。我突然有了个奇怪的想法：他已经死了，他是个鬼魂，任何像他那样的人，都已经死了。

我突然想到，也许看到，在周围走动的许多人全是死人。我们说一个人死了，是指他的心脏停止跳动之后，而不是之前。那似乎有些武断，毕竟身体的某些部分还在运作——比如说头发还要生长好几

年。有可能的是，当一个人的头脑停止思考，不再有能力吸收新观念时，他实际上就死了。波提欧斯老先生就是那样，极其博学，极其有品味——但是他没能力再改变，只是一遍遍地说着同样的东西，有着同样的想法。那种人有很多，大脑死了，内部停止了。只是在同一小段轨道上前前后后活动着，越来越衰弱，如同鬼魂。

我想大概在日俄战争⁹⁹前后，波提欧斯老先生的大脑就停止运转了。差不多所有体面人，那些不想用扳手去砸人脸的人都是那样，这真是令人痛心。他们是体面人，可是他们的大脑已经停止运作。他们对即将遇到的事无法抵抗，因为他们看不到，就算在眼皮底下也看不到。他们还以为英国永远不会变，以为英国便是整个世界。他们理解不了英国无非是残留之物，是个碰巧没挨过炸弹的小小角落。可是东欧的那些新人类是最新型的人，用标语思考，以子弹交谈，他们又当如何？他们跟踪我们，很快就会追上来。在那些伙计眼里，不存在什么公平竞赛规则，但所有体面人都已经瘫痪，是已死的人和活着的大猩猩，似乎除此两种，什么都不是。

大约半个钟头后，我走了，我想说服波提欧斯老先生希特勒并非无关紧要，却全归徒劳。我在冷冷的街道上往家里走时，还在想着这件事。电车已经停开，房子里没有开灯，希尔达也睡了。我把假牙放进浴室中玻璃杯的水里面，穿上睡衣，把希尔达推到床的另一侧。她翻了个身，没醒，她背部有些驼的部分正对着我。真是古怪啊，那种极度的忧郁会在深夜时攫取你。在那一刻，欧洲的命运对我来说，似乎比房租、孩子们的学费账单以及明天要干的工作还要重要，对任何挣钱过日子的人来说，想着那些绝对是愚蠢的，但是我仍然无法停下来不想。还有囚衣和机关枪嗒嗒响的景象。我记得在睡着之前，我琢磨的最后一件事是像我这样的伙计，他妈的干吗要操这份心。

二

报春花开了，我想那是三月里的一天。

我已经开车经过了西汉姆，正在向普德利前进。我要去给一个铁器铺估价，然后能找到人的话，就谈一项人寿保险的事，那个人正在

摇摆，拿不定主意。他的名字是本地代理以前送来的，但在最后一刻他害怕起来，怀疑自己能否掏得起保费。我在劝说人方面很在行，这是长得胖的缘故，这一点能让人们心情愉快，让他们觉得签一张支票简直是件赏心乐事。当然，对付不同的人，要用不同的方式。对有些人，最好强调一下所得红利方面，而对另外一些人，可以不露骨地吓唬他们，暗示一下要是他们死时没有保险，他们的妻子会怎么样。

我的老爷车在连绵起伏的小山上拐来拐去。天哪，多好的天气！你知道通常在三月份某个时候出现的那种天气，到那时，冬天好像突然没了劲儿。过去一连好多天天气一直极差，也就是人们所称的“明亮”天气：天空是冷冰冰的蓝色，风像钝刀子一样割人。然后突然风停了，太阳有了取胜的机会。你也知道那种天气：阳光是黄白色的，树叶纹丝不动。远处有一点儿薄雾，能看到山坡上散布着羊群，像一个个粉笔头。下面山谷里有几堆火，烟柱盘旋着往上升，直到跟薄雾融合到一起。路上只有我一个人，天气暖和得几乎可以把衣服脱下来。

我经过的路边草地上有片地方，报春花长得很密，可能是块黏土地。我放慢速度往前开了二十码后停了下来。天气好得不容错过，我想我一定得下车闻一闻春天的气息，如果没有人来，甚至再摘上几朵报春花，我甚至有点儿想采一束拿回家给希尔达呢。

我关掉引擎下了车。我一向不喜欢让我的老爷车跑空档，总是有些害怕她会把挡泥板或者别的什么给震掉。她是辆一九二七年的型号，已经跑了很多里程。你要是把引擎盖掀起来看一眼，会让你联想到老奥地利帝国，全是用一段段绳子捆在一起，总算汽缸还一直能动。你无法相信会有那么一台机器同时向那么多方向震动，就好像地球运转那样，我记得从哪里看来的，地球有二十二种摇摆方式。你要是在她空档时从后面看她，绝对像是看夏威夷女郎跳草裙舞。

路边有道用五根杠子钉起来的大门，我溜达过去靠在那里。四周看不到一个人，我把帽子往后拉了一点儿，好体验风吹在前额上的暖洋洋感觉。树篱下面的草丛里长满了报春花。正好在大门里面，有流

浪汉或是别的什么人留下的生火痕迹，那是一小堆白色灰烬，袅袅升起一缕烟。再远点儿有个小小的池塘，水面长满了浮萍。地里种的是冬小麦，坡度很陡，紧接着那边有个白垩断面和一小片山毛榉矮树丛，树上长着星星点点的新芽。周围绝对是一片宁静，连风也微弱得吹不起灰烬。不知道哪里有只云雀在啼唱，除此之外，没有一丝声响，甚至也没有飞机。

我靠在大门上待了一会儿。只有我一个，再无他人。我看着田野，田野也看着我。我感到——我不知道你能否理解我的感觉。

我所感到的如今不常见，也就是说听上去好像愚蠢。我感到快乐，我感到尽管我不会长生不老，可是也很愿意那样。你想说的话，可以说无非因为这是春天的第一天，季节对性腺的影响或者别的原因，然而还不止如此。很耐人寻味的是，突然让我相信人生值得好好过的，并非全是因为报春花或者树篱上的芽苞，而主要是大门旁的一小堆火烬。你也知道无风日子时那种木柴火堆的样子：已经烧成白色灰烬的树枝还保留了树枝的样子，灰烬底下还能看到鲜艳的红色。很耐人寻味的是，红色灰烬看上去更有生机，比任何活着的东西给人以更多生命的感觉。它有种因素，是种活力，一种颤动——我想不出最恰当的词，但是它让你知道自己还活着。它是图画上的一点，让你注意到了其他所有东西。

我弯腰去摘一朵报春花，却够不着——肚子太大了。我蹲下摘了一小束，幸好没人看见我。叶子有点儿卷，像兔子耳朵。我站起身，把那束报春花放到大门柱子上。然后，我心血来潮地把假牙从嘴里取出来看。

有镜子的话，我能看到自己全身的样子，不过事实上，我已经知道自己是什么样了。四十五岁的胖子，穿着破旧的灰色人字纹套装，戴着圆顶礼帽；有老婆，两个孩子，在郊区有座房子——这些全能从我的外表上看得出。红脸膛，蓝眼睛里带着醉意。我都知道，不用你来告诉我。但是在我把假牙放回嘴里之前草草看它一眼时，我突然想到那些都无所谓，连假牙也无所谓。我长得胖——不错；我看起来像

是个赌注登记人不成器的兄弟——也对；不会再有女的会跟我睡觉，除非给她钱——这些我全都知道，可是我要告诉你：我无所谓。我不想女人，甚至不想返老还童，只想活着，当我站在那里看着报春花和树篱下的红色火焰时，我是活着的。那是种内心的感觉，一种平和的感觉，但是它又像火焰。

树篱那边再远些的池塘水面上全是浮萍，很像地毯，你如果不知道浮萍是什么，很可能以为它是实地而一脚踩上去。我在琢磨为什么我们都傻帽儿到了这个程度，为什么人们除了确实把时间花在愚蠢之事上，就只是走来走去，对万物只是看看而已？比如说那个池塘吧，里面什么都有：蝶螈，水蜗牛，水生硬壳虫，石蛾，水蛭，还有天晓得另外多少种用显微镜才能看到的東西，还有它们在水底的生存奥秘。你可以花上一辈子、十辈子来看，可你仍然即便对那个池塘也无法了解穷尽。但时时刻刻，你会有种惊奇的感觉，心里还有不寻常的激情。那是唯一值得拥有的东西，我们却不想要。

但是我的确想要，至少当时是那样想的。你别误解我的意思。第一，我不像多数伦敦佬那样，对“乡村”多愁善感，我就是在那里长大的，跟它的距离也太他妈近了。我不想为此阻止人们住在城镇，或者住在郊区，他们想住哪里就住哪里吧。我也不是建议全体人类都把一辈子花在游来荡去摘报春花这类事情上，我知道得一清二楚，我们必须工作。只是那些人在矿洞里咳嗽得要把肺给咳出来，那些女孩子在猛敲打字机，结果谁都没有时间去摘一朵花。再者，你要是长了个大肚皮，还有一座住着暖和的房子，你也不会去摘花的。可那不是我的意思，我心里的感觉是这样的——我承认不经常，但时不时会。我知道那种感觉不错，再说，换了别人也会有，或者说差不多每个人都会有。时时刻刻，它就在不远处，我们都知道它在那里。别再打机关枪了！不管你在追赶什么，别再追了！冷静下来，喘口气，让一丝丝平和渗进你的骨头里。没用，我们不会那样做，而只会继续做着操蛋的蠢事。

下一场战争很快就到，他们说是在一九四一年。太阳再转三周，我们就嗖的一声直入其中了。炸弹像黑雪茄一样冲你而来，最新型的

子弹从布伦式机关枪口往外倾泻。但是那还不会让我特别担心。我太老了，打不了仗。当然会有空袭，但不是每个人都会挨炸，再说，即使有那种危险，谁也不能事先真的料到。我前面已经说过几次，我不是被战争吓坏了，害怕的只是战后，但即使那样，也不大可能对我个人造成影响，因为谁会来找我这种伙计的麻烦？我胖得成不了政治上被怀疑的对象，谁也不会把我干掉或者用胶皮警棍揍我。我是那种警察让怎么动就怎么动的中不溜秋的人。至于希尔达和孩子们，她们大概永远不会注意到有什么变化。可我还是被吓坏了。带刺铁丝网！标语！大面孔！传不出声音的监房，刽子手在那里从后面向你开枪！说到这个，这也会吓坏那些在智力水平上比我笨许多的伙计。那是为什么？因为这意味着要跟我一直在和你所说的那种东西说再见，那种你心里独有的感觉。你要是想，就叫它和平好了，但是我说和平，不是指没有战争，而指的是平和，那是你在心窝里所感到的。要是我们被手持胶皮警棍的伙计抓到，可就永远永远失去了。

我捡起我那束报春花闻了一下。我在想着下宾菲尔德。有趣的是，过去两个月里，它一直不时浮现在我脑海里，是在二十年后我已经几乎把它忘掉时。正在那时，传来了汽车从路上开过来的嗡嗡声。

我像是猛然被拉回现实，突然意识到我在干什么——游荡着摘报春花，而那时的我，应该在普德利的那家铁器铺里清点存货。不仅如此，我也突然想到在车上那几个人的眼里，我会是什么模样：一个戴着圆顶礼帽的胖子手持一束报春花！那看起来根本就不对劲嘛。无论如何，大庭广众之下，胖子是绝对不应该摘报春花的。在能看到那辆汽车之前，我刚好够时间把那束花扔过树篱，干得很漂亮。那辆车里坐满了二十岁左右的年轻蠢货，还不知道他们会怎样取笑我呢！他们全看着我——你也知道那些人坐在开向你的车里看着你的样子——我突然想到即使在那时，不管怎么样，他们可能还会猜我原来在干什么，不如让他们以为是别的事吧。为什么会有人在乡间道路边下车？显而易见！那辆车经过时，我装作在扣裤子上的纽扣。

我用曲柄摇开了发动机（自动打火已经失灵），坐进了汽车。很奇怪，就在我扣裤扣时，我的脑子里四分之三装的是另一辆车里那些

年轻的蠢货时，我想到了一个很棒的主意。

我要回到下宾菲尔德！

为什么不？在把车开到一档时我心想，为什么不可以？有什么能拦住我？他妈的以前到底为什么没想到？去下宾菲尔德过一个安静的假期——那就是我想要的。

别想象我想要回去住在下宾菲尔德。我没计划要抛弃希尔达和孩子，更名改姓重新开始生活，那种事情只发生在书本上。但是有什么能拦住我，不让我悄悄溜回下宾菲尔德，在那里完全一个人过上一星期？

我好像在脑子里都已经谋划停当，只要钱够用就行。我那笔私房钱还有十二镑，可以让我很舒服地过上一星期。我一年有半个月假，一般是在八月或九月，但是如果我编一个像样的故事——比如有亲戚得了不治之症而奄奄一息等——我大概能让公司允许我把假期分成两半休，这样，在希尔达得知真相之前，有一个星期归自己支配。比如说在五月吧，当时山楂树正开花。去下宾菲尔德过上一星期，没有希尔达，没有孩子，没有飞火蛇公司，没有艾里斯米尔路，没有关于分期付款的絮絮叨叨，没有能把人逼傻的交通噪音——只是无所事事、游游荡荡地过一星期，只是去聆听那一片宁静！

但是为什么我想到回到下宾菲尔德？你会问。为什么偏偏是下宾菲尔德？我到那里想有何作为？

我什么作为都没想，那就是部分关键所在。我想要的，是平和与安静。平和！我们在下宾菲尔德曾经有过。我告诉过你那里战前的旧生活方式，没有把它粉饰得十全十美，我还敢说那是种有点儿枯燥、停滞、呆板的生活。你想说的话，可以说我们像是一个个萝卜，但是萝卜不会生活在对老板的恐惧里，也不会夜里躺在床上睡不着觉，脑子里想着下次经济衰退和战争。我们心里拥有过平和，我当然知道即使在下宾菲尔德，日子也会已经有所变化，但是那地方本身不会。宾菲尔德大屋的四周还会有山毛榉树林，伯福德坝那边还会有拖船道，

市场上还会有马槽。我想回到那里，只过上一星期，让那种感觉把我浸透。这有点儿像是东方圣人归隐于沙漠中，而且依我看，照如今事情发展的势头，以后几年里，还会有很多很多人归隐于沙漠中。就像波提欧斯老先生跟我说的那样，古罗马时期，隐士太多时，每个山洞的洞口都有人排队等着呢。

也不是我想去修身养性了，我无非想在坏日子到来前找回自信。因为有哪个脖子之上没死去的人从未怀疑过坏日子即将到来？我们甚至不知道是哪种坏日子，但我们知道那是即将要来的。或许是战争，或许是衰退——不知道，只知道会是不好的。无论往哪个方向前进，总会是往下：进入坟墓，进入污水坑——不知道。而且，除非你内心的感觉对头，否则你无法面对那些。战后二十年里，我们失去了某种东西，就像体内某种至关重要的汁液让我们一点儿不剩地喷洒完了。整天东奔西走！永远为了一点点钱你争我抢，永远是嘈杂不已的公共汽车、炸弹、收音机、电话铃的声音。信心被毁成碎片，而骨头中本该是骨髓的地方，却是空的。

我踩下油门。单是想到要回下宾菲尔德，已经让我精神一振，你会了解我的感觉。上来透口气！就像大海龟划拉着到达水面，伸出鼻子，往肺里吸进一大口气，然后再沉下去与海草和八爪鱼为伍。我们全在一个垃圾箱的底层闷着气，不过我有办法到上面：回到下宾菲尔德！我的脚一直踩在油门上，直到我的老爷车达到了最高速度，时速差不多有四十英里。她咣当得就像个装满陶器的锡盘子，一片噪音中，我几乎要唱起来了。

当然，坏事的会是希尔达。这个念头让我冷静了一些，我把速度降到二十英里左右考虑了一番。

希尔达迟早会发现，这没多少疑问。至于在八月份只休一星期的假，我能够不露破绽地掩盖过去。我可以告诉她公司只给了一星期的假，很可能她不会问很多问题，因为她巴不得有机会节省度假开支。至于孩子们，他们反正会在海边待上一个月。困难在于怎样在五月份的那星期找个借口，不能一走了之。我想，最好的办法是提前很久就

告诉她我要被派往诺丁汉，或者德比，或者布里斯托尔¹⁰⁰，或者别的很远很远的地方做一项特殊工作。但如果我提前两个月就告诉她，就会显得我好像有什么事情瞒着她。

但是，不用说她迟早会发现。相信希尔达好了！她会一开始装作相信，然后会以她那种不事声张、不屈不挠的方式，查清我从来没去诺丁汉、德比、布里斯托尔或者其他我可能说的地方。这种事情她做得令人叹为观止。那种不达目的决不罢休的精神！她不动声色，直到发现我借口中的漏洞，然后，在我关于那件事粗心大意地说了句什么话时，她出其不意地发难，突然亮出所有案卷：“你上星期六在哪儿过的？说谎！你是跟个女人一块儿过的。看看我给你的马甲扫灰时发现的这些头发，看看吧！我的头发是那颜色的吗？”好戏还在后头呢，天知道像这种情况已经发生过多少次。她关于有个女人的猜测有时对，有时不对，结果却总是一样，絮絮叨叨几星期没个完！每顿饭必吵架——孩子们不知道怎么回事。要告诉她我要去哪里过一星期，为什么去是完全没指望的，就算我跟她解释到世界末日，她也永远都不会相信。

可是去他妈的！我想，干吗要费那事？那还远着呢，你也知道事情在之前和之后有多大区别。我把脚又踩上油门。我又有了另外一个想法，比第一个还要大胆。我不在五月份去了，我要在六月的下半月去，那正是捕淡水鱼季节开始的时候，我要去钓鱼！

说到底，为什么不去？我想要平和，钓鱼就是平和。接着，我脑子里想到一个最最大胆的想法，差点儿让我把车开下路。

我要去钓宾菲尔德大屋那里的大鲤鱼！

还是那句话：干吗不去？我们过日子时，总在想着我们想干却干不了的事，那不算奇怪吗？我干吗不能去钓那些鲤鱼？可是你听到我提这个想法，难道不觉得它听起来像是不可能之事、根本不可能发生之事吗？在我看来是那样的，即使在当时，在我看来，它像是异想天开，就像想和电影明星上床，或者获得重量级拳击冠军一样。但也不是完全没可能，不管现在是谁拥有宾菲尔德大屋，如果给他够多的

钱，他大概会出租那个池塘。我的天！我会很开心地掏五镑在那里钓上一天鱼。不过同样很有可能那座房子还是空的，甚至谁也不知道有那么一个池塘。

我想着那个处于树林中阴暗地方的池塘，这么多年一直在等着我呢。还有个头巨大的黑鱼仍然在里面畅游。我的天！要是它们三十年前就长成了那个头，现在会成什么样？

三

那天是六月十七日，星期五，“低俗钓鱼”季¹⁰¹开始后的第二天。

我在安排公司这方面一点儿问题都没有，至于希尔达，我为她编了个像模像样、滴水不漏的说法。我把伯明翰作为我托词要去的地方，最后一刻，我甚至告诉她我将要待的旅馆：鲁堡特姆家庭及商住旅馆。我碰巧知道那家旅馆的地址，因为几年前我在那里住过。同时，我也不想让她写信到伯明翰，只要我离开一星期，她就有可能写信去。考虑之后，我决定跟年轻人桑德斯——他是格里索地板蜡的旅行推销员——交个底，他刚好提到他要在六月十八日路过伯明翰。我让他一定在路上停一下寄封信给希尔达，发信地址为鲁堡特姆旅馆。在那封信里，我告诉她我可能又要被派往别的地方，所以她最好别写信。桑德斯明白了，或者说他自以为明白了。他向我眨了眨眼睛，说像我这把年纪的人还挺棒嘛。那么着，就把希尔达安置好了，她没问什么，就算她以后有怀疑，揭穿这个借口还是需要一番努力的。

我开车穿过了西汉姆，那是个很不错的六月天。有一丝微风，榆树梢在阳光下摇摆，一小朵一小朵白云在天上飘，投下的影子在田野上互相追逐。快到西汉姆时，我看到一个卖和路雪冰淇淋的小伙子，脸蛋红得像苹果，骑着自行车飞驰而来，嘴里还吹着口哨，连我都能听到。他让我突然想到我自己也当过跑腿的（虽然当时我们没有带飞轮的自行车），我差点儿停车买一个。到处都已经割了草，只是还没收回去，正在那里晒干，闪着光摊成一溜。干草味缭绕在路上，跟汽油味混合在一起。

我以不快不慢的十五英里时速开着。那天早上有种平和、梦幻一般的感觉。鸭子在池塘里到处漂浮着，好像已经饱得不想吃东西了。经过西汉姆的村子耐特菲尔德时，一个系着白围裙、长着浓密的灰白胡子的小个子男人突然穿过草地站到路中央，手舞足蹈地吸引我的注意。当然，这一路上的人都认识我的汽车，那只不过是村里杂货铺的主人威弗尔先生。我停了车。不，他不想给自己买人寿险，也不想为铺子买保险，他只是没了零钱，想问我能不能换一镑的“大个儿银币”。耐特菲尔德村子里总是没有零钱，就连酒馆里也没有。

我继续开车前进。小麦长到了腰部那么高，麦田随着山势起伏，就像一张巨大的绿色地毯，风微微吹动它，有点儿厚实，又有点儿类似丝绸的样子。我想，它就像一个女人，让人想躺到上面。前面不远，我看到了路标，两个牌子指示往右去普德利，往左去牛津。

我还在我通常的巡视区域内，按照公司的说法，还在我自己的“管区”范围之内。我向西前进时，自然应该顺着阿克斯桥路开而离开伦敦，可是我心里一动，就走了惯常的那条路，我想在还没开始向牛津郡驶去之前尽量远离它。虽然我把希尔达和公司两方面都已安排妥当，虽然我的皮夹子里还有十二镑，虽然我的行李箱已经放在车后面，但是当我接近路标时，还是感到了诱惑——就算我不会屈服于它，但终究是种诱惑——也就是完全放弃整件事。我有种感觉，如果我开车保持在我通常的巡视区域内，就不算违法。我想那会儿还不太晚，还有时间做堂堂正正的事。比如说，我可以去普德利见见巴克利银行的经理（他是我们在普德利的代理），看有没有新生意。我甚至可以掉头，回到希尔达身边，向她原原本本坦白我的计划。

到拐弯时我慢了下来。我该还是不该？有那么一秒钟工夫，我确实动摇了。但是不行！我按响喇叭，把车往左边打，上了去牛津的路。

就这么着，我干了，我已经身处禁地。不错，再往前五英里，我还可以往左转去西汉姆，但目前我是在向西前进。严格地说，我在逃窜。但奇怪的是，上了去牛津那条路后不久，我就十分肯定他们全知

道了。我说他们时，指的是不会认可这样一次旅行的人，如果能够，他们会制止我——我想那些人完全包括每一个人。

更有甚者，我居然有种感觉他们已经在追赶我。他们所有人！所有不明白一个戴着假牙的中年人怎么会溜开一个星期，到他度过童年时代的地方，那些心思下流、只会往歪处想的混蛋会不惜任何代价阻止我。他们都在追踪我，似乎我后面的路上有支大部队蜂拥而至，我好像脑子里有另外一只眼睛可以看到。不用说，希尔达冲在前面，孩子们紧跟着她，而威勒太太在心怀报复、一脸阴沉地驱赶她。明斯小姐在后面紧追，她的夹鼻眼镜不时滑落下来，她脸上有种苦恼的表情，就像一只母鸡被拉在后面，而别的鸡已经吃上了火腿皮。赫伯特·克拉姆爵士和飞火蛇公司的头头脑脑乘着他们的劳斯莱斯和西瑞牌汽车在追。还有公司里的所有人，所有艾里斯米尔路和其他类似路上受人压迫、作抄抄写写工作的可怜人。他们中有些人推着婴儿车、割草机和水泥轧草坪机，有些人开着突突响的奥斯汀七型车。另外还有些灵魂拯救者和爱管闲事的人，那些人虽然我从来没见过，却一直主宰着我的命运：内政大臣，苏格兰场，戒酒联盟，英格兰银行，比弗布鲁克勋爵¹⁰²，骑着双人自行车的希特勒和斯大林，全体主教，墨索里尼，教皇——他们所有人都在追赶我，我几乎能听见他们在喊叫：

“那里有个家伙以为他能跑掉！那里有个家伙以为他不会给弄成最新型的！他要回到下宾菲尔德！追上他！拦住他！”

很古怪，那种印象如此强烈，我居然真的往车后面的小窗户瞟了一眼，以确定没人在追我。我想那是种负罪感。可是没有人，只有多尘的白色道路和一长溜榆树在我后面越退越远。

我踩下油门，那辆老爷车咣咣当当地达到了时速三十英里。几分钟后，我过了去西汉姆的路口。就那么着了，我已经没有退路。这就是那个主意，从我得到新假牙的那天起，就开始模模糊糊地酝酿了。

第四部

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我从查姆福特山驶向下宾菲尔德。去下宾菲尔德的路有四条，走经过沃尔顿的那条可以少走些弯路，但是我想走经过查姆福特山的那条，是以前我们骑自行车去泰晤士河钓鱼后回家时走的路。刚过山顶，不再有树木挡着视线，你会看到下宾菲尔德就在下方的山谷中。

回到阔别二十年的地方，是种古怪的经历。一切都记得细致入微，但是全错了。所有距离都错了，标志性建筑物好像移动了一点儿。你一直会有这种感觉：这座山以前肯定陡得多，那个转弯肯定原来是去另一个方向，难道不是吗？另一方面，你会有些真真切切的记忆，但只属于某个特定时刻。比如说，你记得某块田地的角上，在冬天下雨的某天，地里的草绿得几乎成了蓝色，一根烂掉的门柱上长满了苔藓，还有头奶牛站在草地上看着你。但是你二十年后再回去时会吃上一惊，因为那头奶牛并非站在同一地方以同样的表情看着你。

我开车向查姆福特山顶驶去时，意识到我脑子里的景象几乎全都出自想象。事实上，某些东西已经改变。那条路是柏油路面，而当年是碎石路面（我还记得骑着自行车时感到过颠簸），而且路面宽多了，树也少得多。当年，灌木树篱那边长着高大的山毛榉树，在有些路段，两边的树枝越过路面接了起来，成了拱门的样子。现在那些树全没了。差不多快到山顶时，我看到了绝对新的东西：路右边是很多有着人造风景的房子，屋檐伸得很长，有玫瑰棚架一类的东西。你也知道那种房子，刚好有点儿过于高级了，不适合排成一排，所以座落得这一处那一处的，像是聚居点。每座房子都有一段接着大路的私家路。其中一座房子的私家路进口处，有块巨大的白色木板，上面写着：

养狗场

供应有谱系证明的锡利哈姆103幼犬

寄养狗

以前肯定没那个，不是吗？

我想了一会儿，对，我想起来了！那些房子所在地方曾是片小橡树林场。那些树因为太密了，结果长得又高又细。春天时，树林里的地上经常长满银莲花。一点儿没错，以前在离镇子这么远的地方，从来没有盖过房子。

我到了山顶，再过一分钟就能看到下宾菲尔德。下宾菲尔德！我干吗还要装作不激动？仅仅想到要看到它，就在我体内产生了一种不寻常的感觉，它悄悄地从下往上蔓延，触动了我的心。再过五秒，我就能看到它了。对，我来了！我松开离合器，踩了脚刹，看吧——天哪！

噢，对了，我知道你知道我将要看到什么，但当时我没想到。你可以说，我没有估计到是我傻帽儿，那就算我是傻帽儿吧，可是我从来根本想都没想到过。

第一个问题是，下宾菲尔德在哪儿呢？

我不是说它被摧毁了，而只是被吞掉了。我往下看着的，是个规模很大的工业镇。我记得——哎呀，我可不是全记得嘛！关于这个，我不认为我的记忆错得离谱——我记得以前从查姆福特山往下看下宾菲尔德的样子。我想当时的大街有半英里长，除了几幢坐落得有些偏远的房子，整个镇大概是个十字架形状，主要标志性建筑物是教堂的尖塔和啤酒厂的烟囱。可是在那时，这两样我都辨认不出来。我看到的是由新房子组成一条极为宽阔的河流，沿着山谷两边流动，两边都到了半山坡。右边是连成几英亩阔的无数一模一样的鲜红色屋顶，看样子像是个大型郡建住宅区。

但是下宾菲尔德呢？我以前知道的那个镇在哪里？它可能无所不在，我知道它就在那一带砖头海洋中。在能看到的五六根工厂烟囱中，我猜都没法猜哪根是啤酒厂的。镇东靠边的地方，有两个规模极大的玻璃厂和水泥厂。开始接受了那些后，我想到那就是镇扩大的原因。我想这地方的人口（在那年头差不多有两千人）如今至少有两万五。好像唯一没变的是宾菲尔德大屋，它在远处，只比黑点大一点儿而已，但是还能看到在那边山坡上，被山毛榉树所包围，镇上的建筑还没有发展到那里。我正在观望时，一队黑色轰炸机飞过小山，从镇子上空嗡嗡地掠过。

我合上离合器，开始缓缓向山下驶去。房子已经建到半山坡。你也知道那种一溜建到半山腰的廉价小房子的样子，房顶一座比一座高点儿，就像一溜台阶，全都一模一样。但是在离那些房子前还有一小段路时，我又把车停下。路左边有另外一样很新的东西：墓地。我在墓地门口对面停车看了一眼。

那块墓地面积极大，我觉得会有二十英亩。新墓地的样子总是会让人骤然感到陌生，里面有粗粗铺就的砂砾道和不怎么样的草皮，还有些机器制作的大理石天使像，像是从结婚蛋糕上取下来的。但那一刻最触动我的，是那块地方以前不存在，当时没有另外的墓地，只有一块教堂墓地。那块新墓地我还隐约记得原来是属于某个农场主的——他叫布莱凯特，是个奶牛场场主。不知怎么，那块墓地的粗糙样子又让我想到真是世事变幻啊。倒不仅仅是镇子发展得太快，以至于他们需要二十英亩地来扔尸体，而是他们把墓地划到外边、置于镇边这件事。你有没有留意到他们现在总这么干？每个新镇子都把墓地划到镇边，推得远远的——别让它碍了眼！他们受不了被提醒有死亡这件事，甚至墓碑也说明了这点。他们从来不说他们脚下的伙计“死了”，总是说“过世”，或者“睡着了”。那年头可不是这样，我们那时的教堂墓地就卡在镇中间，你每天都要经过你爷爷躺着的地方，而且早晚你也会躺到那里。我们并不介意看到死人。我承认，以前天热时，我们还得闻着他们，因为有些家族的墓穴密封得不够好。

我让汽车缓缓地驶下山坡。古怪！你想象不出有多古怪！下山的

一路，我一直能看到鬼影幢幢，主要是树篱、树和奶牛的鬼影，就好像我同时身处两个世界，一方面，过去的东西像稀薄的肥皂泡一样闪现，另一方面，现实存在的东西在其中闪着光。那是公牛追过“黄毛”罗杰斯的田地！那是当年老是长蘑菇的地方！但是那里已经没有田地，没有公牛，也没有蘑菇了，都是房子，到处都是房子，粗糙的小红房子，挂着肮脏的窗帘，还有巴掌大的后院，里面除了丛生的杂草或者几株长在野草中的飞燕草¹⁰⁴别无他物。那些走来走去的人，抖席子的女人，在人行道上玩耍的淌鼻涕小孩儿——全是生人！趁我不防，他们一拥而入，然而在他们眼里，我才是陌生人呢。他们对以前的下宾菲尔德向来一无所知，他们从来没有听说过舒特和威瑟罗尔，也没有听说过格里梅特先生和伊齐其尔叔叔，更不关心他们是谁，这点你可以肯定。

一个人可以多快地调整自己啊，这真是有意思。我想当时离我在山顶上停车时过去了有五分钟，当时我想到要看见下宾菲尔德，竟然有点儿气都出不上来了。但五分钟后，我已经习惯了这一印象，即下宾菲尔德已被吞没，并像秘鲁那些消失的城市一样被埋葬了。我重新振作起精神并正视这件事。说到底，你还能有别的指望吗？镇肯定得扩大，人们必须找地方住。再说，旧镇子并没有被毁灭，它在这一处那一处还存在，只不过围绕它的是房子而不是田地。再过几分钟，我就能再次看到它，还有教堂、啤酒厂的烟囱、我爸那个铺子的橱窗、市场上的马槽等等。我到了山脚，路分了岔。我转向左边，一分钟后，我迷路了。

我什么都不记得了，甚至不记得那里是不是当年镇的边缘，我只知道当时没有那条街。我顺着街开了有一百码——那是条破烂不堪的街，房门就接着人行道，这一处那一处，会有间街角杂货铺或者邋遢的小酒馆——不知道那条街到底他妈的通向哪里。最后，我把车停在一个系着脏围裙、没戴帽子的女人身边，她正在人行道上走路。我把头伸出车窗问：

“对不起——你能告诉我去市场怎么走吗？”

她“说不好”，答话是用一口硬梆梆的土腔，兰开郡¹⁰⁵的，英格兰南部如今有好多那边来的人，从那个穷地方一拥而来。然后，我看到一个穿着工装裤的伙计背着一袋工具走过来，我就又试了一次，这次他的答话是用伦敦土腔，可是他还得先想上一阵子。

“市场？市场？让我想想看。噢——你是说老市场吗？”

我想我指的就是老市场。

“噢，这么走——你在前边转右——”

路很远，我觉得好像有几英里，实际上不到一英里。房子，店铺，教堂，足球场——新的，全是新的。我再次有了敌人在我背后进攻得手的感觉。那些人从兰开郡和伦敦郊区汹涌而来，在一片乱糟糟中落地生根，却根本懒得记镇上标志性地方的名字。但是我那时已经明白以前称为市场的地方，他们怎么会叫它“老市场”。那里现在是个大广场，可是因为它没有一定的形状，称它广场也不太合适。它就在新镇的中心，那里有交通灯和一座铜制雕塑，一头巨大的狮子在撕扯老鹰——我想是纪念战争的。还有无处不有的崭新感！那种粗糙和不入流的样子！你知不知道近几年像吹气球一样突然扩大的那种镇是什么样？就像哈耶斯、斯洛、戴金哈姆之类的地方？那种冷冰冰的感觉，到处是鲜红色砖头，临时凑合模样的店铺橱窗里，放的是减价巧克力和收音机零件，就是那个模样。突然我拐到一条有着老房子的街上。哎呀！大街！

毕竟，我的记忆还没有糊弄我，我现在还知道它的每一寸地方。再走两百码就到市场了，我们家那间旧铺子在大街的那头，我吃完午饭就过去——我要住在乔治旅馆。每寸地方都是记忆！我知道所有的铺子，即使名字全改了，而且多数经营的项目也变了。拉夫格鲁夫家的！托德家的！还有那间光线阴暗的大铺子，带有横梁及屋顶窗，那曾是莉莉怀特店，就是那间布店，爱尔西在那里干过活。还有格里梅特的铺子！显然那里还是杂货铺。这时到了市场上的马槽那里，可是前面有一辆车，所以看不到。

我进入市场时，那辆车转到了另一边，马槽不在了。

当年放马槽的地方，有个汽车协会的人在指挥交通，他看了一眼我的车，发现上面没有汽车协会的标记，就决定不敬礼。

我在拐角那里转了向，去到乔治旅馆那里。马槽不在了，这把我的心扰乱得根本没有抬头看啤酒厂的烟囱还在不在。乔治旅馆除了名字没变，别的全变样了。它的正面装修得跟河滨旅馆差不多，招牌也换了。奇怪的是虽然到那时为止，我二十年来一次也没想到过那面旧招牌，那时却突然发现我对它记得细致入微，从我记事起，它就挂在那里晃悠了。那是一幅技巧有些拙劣的画，上面是圣乔治¹⁰⁶骑着一匹很瘦的马，马蹄踏在一条很肥的恶龙身上。在角上，虽然有点儿破也有点儿褪色，但还是能读出来“Wm.桑德福，油漆匠兼木匠”。新招牌有点儿艺术味，看得出是由一位真正的画家所画。圣乔治看上去是个普普通通、有点儿女人气的男人。原先那个鹅卵石铺地的院子也变了，以前农场主的轻便马车就停在那里，那里也是星期六夜里醉汉呕吐的地方，现在它扩大了有三倍，还铺上了水泥，周围是车库。我把车倒进车库后下了车。

我注意到人类思维的一个特点就是阵发性，没有一种激情能伴随你很长时间。过去的一刻钟里，我经历了一种可以正确地称之为震惊的感觉。我在查姆福特山顶停车，然后突然意识到下宾菲尔德消失了时，我感觉几乎像是被人在肚子上揍了一拳，然后看到马槽不见时，我又像被戳了一小刀。开车穿过那些街道时，我有种沮丧和万事皆休的感觉。但是当我从车里出来，马上戴好软呢帽时，我突然感到那些都他妈无关紧要。那天阳光灿烂，很舒服。旅馆院子里，花种在绿色的桶里，还有其他诸如此类的东西，这些让那里有了点儿夏日气象。另外我肚子饿了，很想找地方吃午餐。

我带着自高自大的神气信步走进旅馆，搬运行李的人急忙走出来迎接我，拎着我的手提箱跟在后面。我有种腰缠万贯的感觉，大概外表上也像。就算你没有看到我的汽车，也会说我是个有钱的商人。我挺高兴来时穿的是新套装——蓝色法兰绒料子，带着白色细条纹，合

身，有种裁缝所谓的“细身效果”。我相信那天我能被当作是个股票经纪人。不管你会怎么说，在六月的一天，阳光照耀着窗口花坛里的粉红色天竺葵，我走进一家挺好的乡村旅馆，而且会在那里吃到有薄荷调料的烤羊肉，这不能不说是一件很愉快的事。倒不是说对我来说住旅馆是享多大的福，老天为证，旅馆我可是住过太多——可是一百次里有九十九次碰到的都是些极差的“家庭及商务”旅馆，就像我当时按说应该待着的鲁博特姆旅馆，一晚上加早餐是五先令，床单却总是潮乎乎的，浴缸水龙头总是坏掉。乔治旅馆变得太漂亮了，我差点儿认不出来，可是在那年头，它几乎称不上是间旅馆，无非是间酒馆而已，不过它还有一两间客房，赶集日还供应农场主吃午餐（烧牛肉、约克郡布丁及板油布丁，还有斯提尔顿干酪¹⁰⁷）。除了酒吧，别的全变了样，我经过时看了酒吧一眼，好像还跟以前一样。我走过一条通道，那里铺着软软的地毯，两边墙上挂着打猎照片、铜制长柄暖炉等诸如此类的破烂玩意儿。我隐隐约约还记得这条通道以前什么样：掏了些洞的旗子垂到了脚边，灰泥和啤酒的气味混合在一起。在登记处，一个髻头发、穿着黑裙子、样子机灵的女孩给我办登记，我想她是个接待员之类的。

“你想要间房吗，先生？没问题，先生。我该怎么写您的姓名呢，先生？”

我停了一会儿，毕竟对我而言，这又是一个重要时刻。她肯定听说过我的姓，不常见，但教堂墓地里埋有很多带这个姓的人。在以前的下宾菲尔德，我们是很古老的家族，下宾菲尔德的保灵家族。虽然被认出来多少让人不舒服，但在那会儿，我盼望着被认出来。

“保灵，”我说得清清楚楚，“乔治·保灵先生。”

“保灵，先生。B-O-A——噢！B-O-W？是了，先生。您是从伦敦来的吗，先生？”

没反应，毫无印象，她从来没有听说过我，从来没听说过乔治·保灵，塞缪尔·保灵的儿子——真他妈的！在超过三十年的时间里，每星期六晚上，塞缪尔·保灵都会在同一间酒吧里喝上半品脱啤酒呢。

餐室也变了。

尽管以前我从来没在那里吃过一顿饭，但是我还记得老餐室的样子。以前那里有个褐色的壁炉台，壁纸是黄褐色的——我从来没弄明白颜色本来就是那样的呢，还是岁月和烟熏让它变成了那样——还有油画，也由油漆匠兼木匠Wm.桑德福所画，关于特尔埃尔其布尔之战¹⁰⁸。如今他们把那地方布置成了中世纪风格：砖砌带炉边的壁炉，天花板上有根很粗的梁，墙上镶着木板，每一点每一处都是假的，隔着五十码都能看出来。那条梁是真正的橡木，大概是从哪条海船上拆下来的，但它并没有支撑着什么，而且我第一眼看到镶木板就起了疑心。我坐下后，那个衣着光鲜的服务员用手拨弄着餐巾走了过来，我敲了敲后面的墙。没错！早料到了！根本不是木头的，而是用某种合成材料冒充而成，还在上面刷了遍油漆。

但午餐还是不错的，我吃了有薄荷调味的羊肉，喝了瓶带法国名字的白葡萄酒什么的，它让我有点儿打嗝，但是感觉愉快。里面还有一个人在用餐，是个三十岁左右的金发女郎，看样子像是个寡妇。我在猜她是否住在乔治旅馆，也略微合计了一下怎样勾搭上她。看到自己的种种感情混合在一起挺有趣。有一半时间我看到鬼影，总是从现实中浮现出来。时间是赶集日，那些五大三粗的农场主在桌子下面晃着腿，靴子上的平头钉刺耳地摩擦着石地板。他们埋头吃牛肉和汤团，分量之大，让你不敢相信一个人的胃怎么能装下那么多。接着，小桌子和闪亮的桌布、葡萄酒杯以及折起的餐巾，还有假冒的装修以及整体上给人的昂贵印象，又会把那些鬼影摧毁。我想：“我有十二镑，穿着新套装。我是小乔治·保灵，谁能想到我是开着自己的汽车回到了下宾菲尔德？”那时，胃部的葡萄酒让我有了种由下往上的暖烘烘感觉。我看了一眼那个长了一头漂亮头发的女人，在脑子里想象把她的衣服剥光。

同一天下午，我又带了点儿白兰地和一根雪茄烟到了休息室。那里也是假冒的中世纪风格，但是有几把最新潮的皮制扶手椅和上面压

着玻璃的桌子。我又看到了鬼影，可是我喜欢看到。事实上，我稍微有了些醉意，希望那个长了一头漂亮头发的女人会进来，我好去跟她套个近乎。但她始终没露面。直到差不多该用下午茶的时间，我出去了。

我溜达到了市场那边，然后往左转。铺子！真是有意思啊，二十一年前给我妈办葬礼的那天，我坐着出租马车经过它，看到它关着门，灰蒙蒙的，招牌上的字让人用管子工用的喷灯给烧掉了，可那时我他妈根本无所谓。但如今，当我跟离它那样遥远，当我实际上已经记不清房子里的点点滴滴时，单是想到要再次见到它，便让我百感交集了。我经过了原先是理发店的地方，如今还是个理发店，名字却改了。有种暖暖的肥皂和杏仁味从门口飘出来，跟以前那种月桂油香水和拉塔其亚烟草气味比起来差多了。那间铺子——我们家的铺子——再走二十码就是。啊！

一个看上去有点儿艺术味的招牌——我不怀疑那是由画乔治旅馆招牌的同一个伙计所画——吊在人行道上：

温迪茶室

供早咖啡

家制饼

茶室！

我想如果它是间肉铺或是铁器铺，或者种子铺之外任何别的什么，我都不会感到同样震惊。就因为你碰巧在某座房子里出生，就觉得一辈子都对它享有权利，这是荒唐的，可是你真的会有这种感觉。那地方的名字没改的话就挺好。橱窗里挂着蓝窗帘，有一两块饼放在那里，是种上面裹了一层巧克力、刚好有核桃仁露出来的饼。我进去了，不是真的想用下午茶，可是我一定要看看里面。

显然，他们把原来的铺子和以前作为起居室的地方变成了茶室。至于以前放垃圾箱和我爸种小片野草的院子，他们把它铺了起来，并

且用乡村风格的桌子和绣球花什么的装点了一番。我直接进了起居
室。更多的鬼影！钢琴，墙上的经文，两张笨重的红色扶手椅——那
不是我爸妈经常在礼拜天下午面对面坐在壁炉边读《大众报》和《世
界新闻报》的地方吗！他们把那地方收拾得比乔治旅馆更有古气：带
活动桌腿的桌子，锻造而成的铁制枝状吊灯，墙上挂着的白盘¹⁰⁹盘子和
其他之类的玩意儿。你有没有留意到，他们总是把这种有点儿艺术
味的茶室里面搞得黑咕隆咚的？我想那也是古气的一部分。里面没有
通常意义上的女服务员，倒是有个穿着某种印花布衣服的年轻女孩过
来招待我，脸上带着恼火的样子。我向她点了茶，她花了十分钟才端
上来。你也知道那种茶——中国茶，淡得让你以为只是白开水，除非
兑上牛奶。我坐的地方几乎跟原来我爸的扶手椅放的位置一样。我几
乎能听到他在说话，正在读《大众报》上的“一条”——那是他经常的
说法，关于新的飞行器或者被鲸鱼吞下的那个伙计，要么是别的什
么。我因此有了种很不寻常的感觉，那就是我是装作喝茶待在那里，
要是他们发现我是谁，就会把我轰出去，但同时，我又有点儿想告诉
别人我出生在那里，我曾属于那座房子，要么说（这是我真正的感
觉）那座房子属于我。当时没有一个人在用下午茶，那个穿着印花布
衣服的女孩在窗户边晃悠，我看得出如果不是我在场，她准会在剔
牙。我咬了口她拿给我的饼。家制饼！真是不假啊，家制的，却用上
了人造黄油和鸡蛋代用品。到最后，我忍不住开口说：

“你在下宾菲尔德住很久了吗？”

她吓了一跳，满脸惊讶，可是没有回答我，我又试了一次：

“我以前也住在下宾菲尔德，很久以前的事了。”

还是没有回答，要么是我没听到她说什么。她冷冷地看了我一
眼，然后又盯着窗外看。我看出来是为什么：对一个女孩而言，去跟
顾客聊天的话就太过分了，再者说，她大概觉得我想占她便宜呢。告
诉她我就出生在这间屋子里又有何用？就算她相信，也不见得有兴趣。
她从来没听说过谷物及种子商塞缪尔·保灵这个人。我付完账就走
了。

我漫步走向教堂。有件事让我半是害怕半是盼望，那就是被以前认识的人认出来。可是不用担心，街上处处没有一张我认识的脸，似乎整个镇上的人口全换了。

我走到教堂那边时，看出他们为什么需要新墓地：教堂墓地到边上已经全满了。有一半坟墓上的名字我不知道，知道名字的又不容易找到。我在坟墓间转了转。教堂司事刚割过草，所以那里有股夏天的味道。我认识的老人都不在世了。屠户格拉威特，另一个种子商威克尔，曾是乔治旅馆老板的特鲁，糖果店的威勒太太——全都躺在那里。舒特和威瑟罗尔的坟在小道两边对峙，好像他们还在过道两边对唱。这么说威瑟罗尔到底没能活到一百岁，他出生于一八四三年，一九二八年“辞世”。但他还是胜过了舒特，跟以前一样。舒特死于一九二六年，最后两年没人跟他对唱，老威瑟罗尔肯定过得不好受！格里梅特老头的坟上，有个很大的大理石制玩意儿，很像是块小牛肉和火腿馅饼，还有一圈铁栏杆围着。一个角落那里，全是一群姓西蒙斯的人，坟头上是廉价的小十字架。全都归于尘土。长着烟丝色牙齿的荷吉斯老头，长着浓密的褐色连鬓胡子的老拉夫格鲁夫，有着马车夫和男仆的兰普林太太，有着玻璃眼球的哈里·巴恩斯的婶子，米尔农场那个丑得就像用果核刻出来的布鲁厄老头——他们什么都没留下，除了一块石板和在地底下天晓得变成了什么样的他们。

我找到了我妈的坟，我爸的就在旁边。他们两座坟都被照管得很好，教堂司事经常除草。伊齐其尔叔叔的坟在不远处。他们移走了不少老坟，像床架头一样的旧式木制坟头装饰都被清理了。隔二十年再看到父母的坟墓会有什么感觉？我不知道你怎么样，不过我可以告诉你我所感到的，那就是空白。我爸我妈从来没有从我的记忆里变淡，就好像他们在我记忆里的某处永远存在。我妈坐在褐色茶壶后边，我爸的光头上沾了些磨粉，还有他那副眼镜和灰白胡须，都像照片一样，已被固定了下来，但从某种意义上说，又是活生生的，那两个地底下盛着骨头的盒子似乎跟他们没有关系。我站在那里时，只是开始琢磨起在地下会感觉怎么样，是不是还有很多在乎的事，要过多久才会不在乎了。就在那时，突然有个很浓的阴影扫过我，让我稍微吃了一惊。

我扭头往上看，不过是架轰炸机挡住了阳光，在那里，好像冷不防就能看到轰炸机。

我溜达进了教堂。几乎是我回到下宾菲尔德后的第一次，我没了疑神疑鬼的感觉，要么更可能的是我还有那种感觉，不过是以另外一种方式。因为一切都没变，什么都没变，只是所有人都不在那里了。甚至跪垫看上去还是那个样。同样的尘土般甜丝丝的尸体气味。天哪！就连窗户上还是一样的洞，只不过因为当时已是傍晚，太阳到了另一边，所以光点才没有顺着过道悄悄扫过去。里面还是长椅——还没有变成扶手椅。那是我们家坐的长椅，那是前面的一排，以前威瑟罗尔经常在那里跟舒特对吼。亚摩利王西宏和巴珊王噩！过道上磨损了的石头上，仍然勉强能读出躺在其下的人们的墓志铭。我蹲下来看某一块上面的字，它对着我们家以前所坐的长椅。我还记得一点儿上面能读出来的字，字的排列方式好像印在了我的脑海里，天晓得布道时我读过多少次。

此处……儿子，此教区

的先生……他的公正

及正直……

……

给他的……多方面的恩惠

他多了一种勤勉……

……

……他钟爱的妻子

阿米里亚，在……生七个

女儿……

我记得小时候，那种长S经常让我迷惑。我以前经常想着以前他们是不是把S音发成了F音，如果那样的话，又是为什么¹¹⁰。

正在那时，我听到身后有脚步声，我抬起头，一个穿法衣的伙计站在我面前，是牧师。

可我指的是那位牧师！是老贝特顿，他一直是牧师——不对，实际上他不是从我能记事起就是，而是从一九〇四年或那年前后才当上牧师。我一下子就认出了他，尽管他的头发已经很白。

他没有认出我，我只是个穿着蓝套装的胖旅行者，正在进行观光。他说了晚上好之后，就开始了那一套惯常的谈话——我对建筑感兴趣吧，那是一座很了不起的老建筑，其建造可以追溯到撒克逊¹¹¹时期等等诸如此类的话。很快，他就蹒跚着走来走去向我介绍值得一看的东西，也就是——通向教堂附属室的诺曼底式拱门，在纽伯瑞战役¹¹²牺牲的罗德里克·波恩爵士的铜像。我就像是条挨了鞭子的狗一样跟着他，那是一个中年商人在被人领着参观教堂或画廊时一贯的样子。可是我有没有告诉他我已经全知道了？我有没有告诉他我是乔治·保灵，塞缪尔·保灵的儿子——就算他不记得我，也会记得我爸——还有我不仅听他布道听了十年，而且上过他的坚信礼课程，甚至是下宾菲尔德读书小组的一员，为了取悦他，读过《芝麻与百合》？没有，我没有告诉他。我只是跟着他走来走去，嘴里咕咕哝哝的，就是当别人告诉你这个那个有五百年历史，而你除了说看不出来，不知道他妈的该说什么时的样子。自打我第一眼看到他起，我就打定主意让他以为我是个陌生人算了。我不失体面地往教堂费用箱丢下六便士后，就马上匆匆溜掉了。

但是为什么？既然终于碰到一个以前就认识的人，干吗不跟他联络一下？

那是因为他二十年后的外貌着实把我吓坏了。我想你以为我的意思是他看上去比以前老了，可是他不老！他看上去更年轻了，而且这突然让我明白了关于时光流逝的一些事。

我想老贝特顿如今差不多有六十五岁，那么上次见到他时，他有四十五岁——跟我现在岁数一样。他的头发如今全白了，他为我妈主持葬礼时头发还没有全白，就像一把修面的刷子。但是我一看到他，就非常吃惊，他比以前更年轻了，我原先以为他是个老头，但毕竟那时他还不算太老。我想起来了，我还是个小孩子时，所有四十五岁以上的人在我眼里，好像只是老而无用的废物，他们老得几乎没什么区别。一个四十五岁的男人在我眼里，曾经好像比现在看到的这位六十五岁、走路蹒跚的人还要老。老天！我也有四十五岁了，这可把我吓坏了。

这么说我在二十岁的人看来，也是那样子了，匆匆走过坟墓之间时，我这样想着。无非是个又老又笨的可怜鬼，完蛋了。奇怪，一般说来，我对自己的年龄他妈的一点儿也不放在心上。我为什么要？我长得是胖，可我身强体壮，想干什么就能干什么。一朵玫瑰如今在我闻来，气味跟我二十岁时一样，可是我对于玫瑰来说气味是否一样？像是为了回答这个疑问，一个可能有十八岁的女孩从教堂墓地的小道上走来。她只能在我身边一两码处跟我错个身。我看到她看我的那一眼，就那么为时极短的一眼。不，不是害怕，不是敌意，只是难以接近、淡漠一眼，就像与其对望了一眼的野生动物的眼神。她在我离开下宾菲尔德的二十年里出生、长大，我的全部记忆对她来说，只是毫无意义。她就像是一头动物，生活在跟我完全无关的世界里。

我回到了乔治旅馆。我想喝一杯，可是酒吧还要再过半个钟头才开。我到处走了一下，读一本去年的《体育和戏剧》杂志。不久，那个金发女郎——就是我想着可能是寡妇的那个——走了进来。我突然极其迫切地想要搞上她，想向自己展现一下我这把老骨头还有些活力，就算这把老骨头的确不得不戴上了假牙。我想，不管怎么样，要是她三十岁，而我四十五，那也不算离谱。我站在空壁炉边，装作在烤屁股，夏天时人们会有那种举动。我穿上蓝色套装还不算太差。有些胖，这不用说，但是仪表堂堂，人中龙凤啊，我能被认为是个股票经纪人。我用了最时髦的口音，随随便便地说：

“今儿这六月天很不错哩。”

这句话说得很是不痛不痒，不是吗？跟那种例如“我以前不是在那儿见过你吗”的话不在同一层次上。

但是没用。她没回答，只是放下正在读的报纸看了我一眼，为时差不多半秒钟，眼神锐利得能砸破窗玻璃。真恐怖啊，她那种蓝眼睛，能像子弹一样打中人。就在那几分之一秒之间，我看出我对她的判断错得不可救药。她不是那种染了头发的寡妇，喜欢被人带去舞厅。她是个中上阶层的人，很可能是个海军将军的闺女，还上过那种好学校，在里面打过冰球。而且我把自己判断错误了，不管穿的是不是新套装，我冒充不了股票经纪人，只不过是个商品推销员，手头刚好有那么一点儿钱而已。我溜进酒吧单间，想在饭前喝上一两品脱啤酒。

啤酒也不一样了。我记得老的啤酒味，是好的泰晤士河谷啤酒，有点儿特殊味道，因为是用含白垩的水酿造的。我问酒吧服务员：“啤酒厂还是比塞米尔家的吗？”

“比塞米尔家？噢，不，先生！他们搬走了。噢，很多年前的事了——在我们到这儿之前很久。”

她是那种待人友好的人，我称为大姐型的酒吧服务员，有三十五岁的样子，面容温和，而且因为经常拿啤酒杯把，手臂长得很胖。她告诉我是哪家联合企业吞并了啤酒厂。实际上，我也能从味道上猜出来。酒吧呈环状，分成了隔间。公共吧台对面有两个伙计在玩飞镖，吧台里面有个我看不到的伙计，但是他偶尔用低沉的嗓音插话。酒吧服务员用她的胖胳膊肘撑在吧台上跟我聊了一会儿天。我说遍以前我认识的人名，她却是一个都没听说过。她说她到下宾菲尔德才五年，她甚至没听说过老特鲁，此人曾经是乔治旅馆的老板。

“我以前就住在下宾菲尔德。”我告诉她，“很久以前了，在战前。”

“战前？哎呀！您看上去没那么老嘛。”

“我敢说您看到了不少变化。”吧台里面的那个伙计说。

“这个镇扩大了，”我说，“我想是因为工厂的原因吧。”

“噢，当然，大部分人都在工厂干活。有个留声机厂，还有个‘真适长筒袜’厂。可是当然，如今都造炸弹。”

我一点儿也没看出来这为什么是当然的事，但是她开始跟我说起一个在长筒袜厂工作、有时来乔治旅馆喝一杯的小伙子，是他告诉她那间工厂造炸弹，也制造长筒袜。不知道为什么，我没明白过来，这两样东西不大容易联系起来。接着，她告诉我在沃尔顿附近的飞机场的事——那就是我时不时看到轰炸机的原因——紧接着，我们像通常那样聊起战争的事。有意思，我正是为了躲避关于战争的想法才来这里的，但是说到底，你又怎么能躲避得了？它就在你呼吸的空气里。

我说它将在一九四一年到来，吧台里面的伙计说照他看是件坏事，酒吧服务员说战争让她毛骨悚然。她说：

“说了那么多，做了那么多，看来好像不是什么好事，对不对？有时候我夜里躺着睡不着，就听那些大家伙在头顶飞，我自个儿想：‘好吧，你看，要是它扔下一颗炸弹，落在我头顶上可咋办！’还有空袭预防措施的事。空袭警报哨托杰斯小姐告诉我们如果抱住头，用报纸把窗户堵严实就没事儿了。他们还说要在镇公会下面挖防空洞。可是照我看，您怎么能给婴儿戴上防毒面具？”

吧台里的伙计说他在报纸上看到过，说人们应该待在热水浴缸里，直到完全结束后再出来。在公共酒吧那边的两个伙计听到了，顺着这个话题扯了些不相干的话，说不知道一个浴缸里能盛下几个人，还问酒吧服务员他们能不能跟她共用一个。她叫他们不得放肆，然后又给他们拿去几品脱淡味啤酒。我喝了口啤酒，是种很差劲的玩意儿。苦啤，那是所谓的叫法。一点儿不错，真够苦的，太苦了，有点儿硫黄味。是化学品。据说英国产的啤酒花如今都不用来造啤酒了，而是全被用来制造化学品，而另一方面，化学品用来造啤酒。我不觉就想起伊齐其尔叔叔，换了他会怎样评价这啤酒，也不知道他会怎么

评价空袭预防措施，还有按说用来扑灭燃烧弹的一桶桶沙子。酒吧服务员又回到我这边酒台后，我问她：

“对了，‘城堡’现在是谁的？”

“‘城堡’，先生？”

“他是说宾菲尔德大屋。”吧台里面的伙计说。

“噢，宾菲尔德大屋！咳，我以为您说的是纪念堂呢。宾菲尔德大屋现在是麦罗尔医生的了。”

“麦罗尔医生？”

“是，先生，他那儿收治了六十个病人，听说是。”

“病人？他们把那儿变成了医院什么的吗？”

“这个嘛——它跟一般医院不一样，更接近是个疗养院，收的是精神病人，真的。他们叫它‘精神之家’。”

疯人院！

可是说到底，你还指望是别的什么吗？

三

从床上爬起来时，我嘴里有股怪味，骨头也咯咯作响。

事实上，前一天在午餐和晚餐时，我每顿都喝了一瓶葡萄酒，中间还喝了几品脱啤酒，再加一两杯白兰地，我喝得有点儿多了。有几分钟时间，我站在地毯中央，眼睛也没有专门盯着什么看，我太累了，一动也不想动。你也知道清晨起来时，那种很恐怖的感觉，主要在腿上，可是它对你说的话比任何言语还要清楚：“你他妈干吗还要撑下去？老家伙，你歇了吧！去吸煤气自尽吧！”

后来，我定了定神走到窗前。又是个很好的六月天，阳光刚刚扫

过屋顶，照着街对面房屋的正面，窗口花坛里的粉红色天竺葵还是看着很不错。虽然当时才八点半，而且那只是市场之外的一条偏街，可街上仍然有很多人来来往往。身穿黑套装、手提公文包、职员模样的伙计汇成人流匆匆走着。他们全都往同一个方向走，这里好像也是伦敦郊区，他们在抢着去坐地铁。学童三三两两游荡着往市场方向走。我又有了前一天看到那一带红房子丛林吞掉查姆福特山时有过的感觉。操蛋的不请自来的人！这里有两万破门而入的人，却连我的姓都不知道。这里处处涌动着新的生活，而我，一个可怜的、戴着假牙的老胖子，从窗户那里看着他们，嘴里嘟囔着谁都不想听的三四十年的事。老天！我想到了，我以为我看到鬼影，我错了，我自己就是鬼嘛。我死了，他们是活的。

吃过早餐后——鳕鱼，烤腰子，烤面包和果酱，一壶咖啡——我感觉好了点儿。那个冷若冰霜的女人没在餐室用早餐，空气里有种宜人的夏天感觉，我放不下那个想法，那就是我穿上蓝色法兰绒套装后，有点儿仪表堂堂。老天！我在想，如果我是鬼，那我就真的当鬼好了。我会走一走，在老地方闹一闹鬼，也可能在偷走我的故乡小镇的几个杂种身上玩点儿邪法。

我开始出去转转，可是还没过市场呢，就被一个意外的景象吸引住了脚步。大约有五十个学童正四个一排在街上列队行进——他们看上去很军事化——边上还有个铁板面孔的女人跟着他们，像是个准尉。打头的四个扛了一面镶着红白蓝三色边的旗帜，上面以特大字体写着“英国人准备好”。街角上的理发匠出来站到门口看着，我跟他搭话。他是个头发油光、面容呆板的伙计。

“小孩儿在干吗？”

“防空袭演习，”他含糊地说，“空袭预防措施什么的演习，在这儿叫A.R.P.，是种演习，那是托杰斯小姐，那就是。”

我本来应该能猜到那就是托杰斯小姐，从她眼神里就能看出来。你知道那种头发灰白、腌鱼脸色的凶老太婆，总是由她们负责女童子军附属机构、基督教青年会宿舍之类的地方。她穿的外套和裙子不知

怎么，看上去像是军装，还会给你一种强烈的印象，就是她还勒了条武装带，不过实际上没有。我知道她那种类型的人：战时参加过陆军妇女辅助队，从那时起，一天也不曾过得开心过，空袭预防措施一事正对了她的脾气。小孩子拥过去时，我听到她在向他们用正牌准尉的声音吆喝：“莫妮卡！抬右脚！”接着我又看到后面的四个又打着另一面旗帜，边上是红白蓝三色，中间是：

我们准备好了，你呢？

“他们操练来操练去干吗？”我问理发匠。

“不晓得，我想是宣传什么的吧。”

我当然知道。让小孩子有战争观念，给我们全体人一种无处可逃的感觉，轰炸机是要来的，跟圣诞节会到一样错不了。进防空洞吧，别争辩了。从沃尔顿那边飞过来的黑色的大飞机正嗡嗡响着从镇的东北方向上空飞过。老天！我想，战争打响时，谁都不会比遇到一场暴风雨更吃惊，我们已经在等着听第一颗炸弹响起来。理发匠又告诉我因为托杰斯小姐的功劳，学童已经领到了防毒面具。

我开始逛整个镇子，过去两天，我只是在老的标志性地方附近转悠，也就是能认出的地方。前前后后，我从来没遇到一个认识我的人。我是个鬼，就算我并非真的无形，感觉上也像是这样。

真是古怪，我说不出来有多古怪。H.G.威尔斯有篇小说，关于一个能同时身处两地的伙计——也就是说，他实际上在自己的家里，但他有种幻觉，觉得他身处海底，你读过吗？他在自己的房间里走动，但他看到的不是桌椅，而是波浪状水草和要来捉他的巨大的螃蟹和乌贼。没错，跟那一样怪。我花了几个钟头走着的地方以前并不存在。顺着人行道走时，我会边数自己的脚步边想：“对了，这儿是什么什么地块开始的地方。树篱伸过街上，刚好从那座房子中间穿过。加油站那里实际上长过一棵榆树。这儿是菜地边，这条街（那条街有着一排小而破旧的半独立式房子，我还记得名字，叫康伯莱奇街）是以前跟凯蒂·西蒙斯散步的小道，两边还有坚果树丛。”毫无疑问，我把远

近距离弄错了，但是大方向没错。我不相信有哪个不是出生在这里的人会相信，仅仅二十年前，这些街道还是庄稼地呢。好像乡下已被城市远郊的某次火山爆发所掩埋。布鲁厄老头以前那块地几乎已经全被郡建住宅区给吞掉。米尔农场不见了，饮牛池塘已被抽干填满——我就是在那里钓到过第一条鱼——上面还建起了房子，结果是，我根本说不准池塘原来的位置在哪里。到处是房子，房子，带女贞树篱的小小红色四方体，全都差不多。郡建住宅区外面，建筑稍微没那么密集，可是偷工减料的建房商仍大展身手。那里有一堆堆房子，这一处那一处的，谁有钱能去那里买上一块地，就算谁的。临时道路通向那些房子，没建房的地块上，立着建房商的广告牌，另外还有些毁了的田地，地里长着蓟草，还扔了一地罐头瓶。

另一方面，以前的镇中心在建筑方面变化还不算太大。许多铺子尽管换了名字，却还做着跟以前同样的生意。莉莉怀特布店还是间布店，可是看样子生意不是很兴旺，屠户格拉威特原来的铺子如今是一间卖收音机零件的铺子；威勒大妈铺子的小窗户用砖砌了起来，格里梅特的铺子还是间杂货铺，可是被“国际”吞并了。这能让你想到这种大联合企业的实力，居然能吞并掉格里梅特这样精明的老抠门。但是据我了解——还不用说教堂墓地里那块顶呱呱的墓碑——我肯定他是趁生意还旺时脱手的，带着一万到一万五千镑上了天堂。唯一没有易手的是撒拉辛斯，就是那些人毁了我爸。他们的规模扩张得极大，镇上新建部分那里，另外还有间很大的新店，但是已变成一个类似百货商店的地方，除了以前卖的园艺工具，还卖家具、药品、五金和铁器等。

那两天主要的时间我都用来到处闲逛了，也不是真的在长吁短叹、絮絮叨叨，但有时候我感觉想那样一下。另外，我喝酒超过了量，几乎一到下宾菲尔德就开始酗酒，打那以后，酒馆好像总是开门不够早，开始营业前的半个钟头，我总是心痒万分。

得提醒你，我的心情并非一成不变。有时候我好像觉得下宾菲尔德给毁掉的话，我他妈无所谓。说到底，除了从家里躲出来，我还有别的目的吗？没理由我不去干一干所有想干的事，甚至去钓一下鱼。

星期六下午，我甚至去大街上的钓具商店买了根拼竹鱼竿（我还是个小孩时，总渴望有根拼竹鱼竿，比绿心木的稍贵），还有鱼钩、接钩线之类。店里的气氛鼓舞了我。别的什么都会变，钓具不会——因为不用说，鱼也不会变。那个店员没觉得一个中年胖男人买钓具有任何滑稽之处，相反，我们还聊了一会儿在泰晤士河钓鱼和前年有人钓上来的一条大白鲑鱼的事，他用黑面包、蜂蜜加绞碎的熟兔肉做的鱼饵。我甚至——虽然我没告诉他为什么要买，我几乎对自己也不能承认——买了他那里最结实的、用来钓鲑鱼的引线，还有几个钓斜齿鳊的五号鱼钩，是为了钓宾菲尔德大屋的大鲤鱼买的，如果还在的话。

礼拜天上午的大部分时间里，我脑子里一直有些斗争——我该去钓鱼吗，还是不该去？有一会儿，我想他妈的干吗不去，可是转过头又想，它不过是人们一直想去做却从未做成的事情之一。可是到了下午，我把汽车开出来开到伯福德坝那里。我想我就看一眼河吧，到明天，如果天气不错，我可能拿着新鱼竿，穿上行李箱里的旧外套和灰白色法兰绒裤子去好好钓一天鱼，我愿意的话，可以钓上三四天。

我开车开过了查姆福特山，在山下，道路转了向，跟拖船道平行。我下车走了走。啊！一堆红白色的小平房在路边破土而起。当然，我本来就应该估计到。那里好像还有很多汽车到处停着。我向河边越走越近时，耳边传来了声音——没错，叮叮咚咚的！——没错，是留声机。

我绕到头，看到了拖船道。老天！我又吃了一惊。那里黑压压的都是人，而原来经常被水淹的地方，有了茶室、投币机、卖甜品的小亭子，还有卖和路雪冰淇淋的伙计。我还不如去马吉特¹¹³呢。我记得以前拖船道的样子，在上面可以走上几英里，除了船闸口那里有几个伙计，另外不时有个不紧不慢跟在马后面的驳船船夫以外，从来遇不到别的人。我们去钓鱼时，总是只有我们自己。我经常整下午坐在那里，可能有只鹭鸟站在五十码之外上游岸边的浅水里，过上三四个钟头，也不会有人经过把它吓走。可我是从哪里得来的想法，以为成年人不钓鱼？河岸边上上下下，就我目光所及，到处是一个挨一个的男人在钓鱼，隔五码就有一个。我还在琢磨到底他妈的怎么会都到这里

来了，直到后来，才恍然大悟他们肯定属于某个钓鱼俱乐部之类。河里挤满了船——划桨船、小划子、方头平底船、汽艇等，上面全是几乎一丝不挂的年轻蠢货，全在尖叫、嚷嚷着，多数船上还有留声机。因为汽艇掀起的波浪，那些想钓鱼的可怜鬼的鱼浮漾上漾下。

我走了一会儿。虽然是晴天，水却是脏的，而且波浪汹涌。谁都没钓到什么，连小鲤鱼也没有。我怀疑他们是不是真的以为能钓到鱼，那么一大群人，多少鱼也会吓得没影了。我看着在冰淇淋纸杯和纸袋子中间漾上漾下的鱼浮时，真怀疑还有没有鱼可钓。泰晤士河里还有没有鱼？我想肯定有，但我可以发誓泰晤士河的水跟以前不一样，颜色很不一样。当然，你会认为那无非是我的想象而已，可我告诉你不是这样。我知道河水已经变样了，我记得泰晤士河水以前的样子，那是种闪着光的绿色，往下能看得很深，还有一群群鲛鱼绕着水草巡游。如今，你往下看不到三英寸深，全是褐色的脏水，水面还有层来自汽艇的油膜，不用说还有烟屁股和纸袋子。

过了一会儿我离开那里，我再也受不了留声机的声音。我想那当然是因为礼拜天的原因，换个时间可能没那么糟糕。但是说到底，我知道我是再也不会回来了。天杀的，让他们留着那破河吧。不管我去哪里钓鱼，都绝对不会在泰晤士河。

人群涌动着经过我身边。操蛋的外来人，几乎全都年纪轻轻。男男女女一对对嬉戏着走过去。有一队女孩经过我，她们穿喇叭裤，戴着白帽子，像是美国海军戴的那种，上面还印着字。有个可能有十七岁女孩的帽子上面印着“请吻我”，这我倒不介意。我突然心血来潮地转到边上，在一台投币机上称了体重。不知道里面哪里传出咋哩咋啦的声音——你也知道那种机器，除了告诉你的体重，还给你算命——然后吐出一张打好字的卡片。

您拥有过人的天赋，但是因为过分谦虚，您从未获得应得的奖励。

您周围的人知道您的能力。您太喜欢靠边站，任由他人抢了您自己完成之事的功劳。

您是个感觉敏锐而热情的人，总是忠于您的朋友。您对异性有极强的吸引力。您最大的缺点便是慷慨。坚持吧，因为您前程无量！

您的体重：14石11磅¹¹⁴。

我注意到过去三天里，我已经花掉了四镑，肯定都花在酗酒上了。

四

我把车开回旅馆，把车丢到车库后，虽然已经过了下午茶时间，可我还是去喝了一杯。因为是礼拜天，酒吧还有一两个钟头才开始营业。在傍晚的凉意中，我出门往教堂方向溜达过去。

穿过市场时，我注意到前边不远走着一个女人，一看到她，我就极不寻常地感觉在哪里见过她，你也知道那种感觉。当然，我看不到她的脸，单就她的背影来说，完全无法让我认出来是谁，可我还是敢发誓我见过她。

她沿大街走着，然后转到右边的一条偏街上，就是伊齐其尔叔叔的铺子以前所在的那条街。我跟了上去，也不清楚干吗要那样做——也许半是好奇，半是谨慎。我的第一个想法，是到底算是有了个我以前在下宾菲尔德认识的人，但几乎就在同时，我突然想到她同样有可能来自西布莱奇里。那样的话，我可得小心些，因为要是她发现我在这里，大概会透露给希尔达，所以我小心跟着她，保持一段安全距离，也在尽力研究那背影，却看不出一点儿与众不同的地方。那是个长得有点儿高、有点儿胖的女人，可能有四五十岁，穿的是件很旧的黑裙子，没戴帽子，好像刚从家里溜出来没多久。她走路的样子让你觉得她的鞋跟磨没了。总而言之，她看上去有点儿像是个荡妇，但是仍然没有任何地方能让我认出她是谁，只是多少让我模模糊糊知道见过她，可能是她走路的动作。那会儿，她走到一间卖糖果和卖纸的小铺子，那种地方总是礼拜天也不关门。铺子的老板娘正站在铺门口，在摆弄明信片架。我跟着的那个女人停下来消磨一会儿时间。

我一找到个可以装作往里面观看的铺子橱窗也就停了下来。那是一间水暖和装修店的橱窗，里面全是墙纸样品和卫浴设备之类的东西。那时，我和她们距离不到十五码，能听到她们在那里叽叽咕咕，就是女人们为消磨时间而进行的毫无意义的对话。“没错，就那样了，就是那样。我跟自个儿说：‘唉，你还能有别的指望吗？’我说。看样子就不对头，是不是？可是又有啥用，还不如去跟块石头说话呢。丢人！”如此这般，没完没了。我就快猜中了。很明显，我跟着的那个女的是个小店主的老婆，跟另外一个一样。我正琢磨她究竟会不会是我在下宾菲尔德所认识的谁时，她转过身子，几乎正对着我，我看到她四分之三的脸庞。我的天！是爱尔西！

不错，是爱尔西，绝无可能弄错。爱尔西！那个又胖又丑的母夜叉！

那一下让我吃惊不小——得提醒你，不是因为看到了爱尔西，而是看到她长成了什么样——有一会儿，我眼前有眩晕的感觉。橱窗里的铜水龙头、球阀还有瓷器都沉下去，什么都好像消退到远方，所以我既是在看着它们，又没有看进眼里。还有那么一阵，我感觉惊慌失措，害怕她有可能已经认出了我，她跟我打了照面，却没有做出任何表示。过了一会儿，她转过身又走了。我又跟了上去，那是危险的，因为她有可能发现我在跟踪她，可能让她开始猜度我是谁。她事实上对我有了很强的吸引力。说起来，我之前也一直看着她，可是从那时起，我开始用很不一样的眼光来看她。

太可怕了，但是在研究她的背影时，我有了种类似科学研究的乐趣。二十四年在一个女人身上所起的作用很可怕，短短二十四年，就能让我认识的那个有着奶白色皮肤、红嘴唇和浅金色头发的女孩，变成这样一个拱肩曲背的母夜叉，脚上的鞋跟扭着，走路一摇一晃。那让我衷心感到欣慰我是个男人，没有一个男人会变得如此不可收拾。我长得胖，你可以这么说，想说我身材不好也行，但起码我还有个身材。爱尔西根本不算特别胖，只是没有一点儿身材了。她臀部的变化让人不忍多看，至于她的腰部，则是看不到了。她只是一种柔软笨重的柱形体，就像一包肉。

我跟着她走了很远，走出老镇，穿过了不知道名字的很多条破烂的小街。最后，她拐进一家铺子。看她走进去的樣子，显然是她自家的铺子。我在窗户外面停了一下。“G.库肯，甜食兼烟草店。”这么说，爱尔西是库肯太太了。那是家脏兮兮的小铺子，跟她之前停过脚的那个很像，但还要小得多，破旧得多，好像除了烟草和最便宜的糖块就没有别的卖。我琢磨着买样什么东西能花上一两分钟时间，后来看到橱窗里有一根廉价烟斗，就进了铺子。进去之前，我还得给自己壮壮胆，因为要是她不巧认出我，就不免需要费劲编些谎话。

她消失在铺子后面的房间里，但在我叩打柜台时，她出来了。这样我们就面对面了。啊！没有表示，她没有认出我来，只是用她们那种看人的方式打量我。你也知道那种小店主看顾客的样子——完全是缺乏兴趣。

那是我第一次看到她的整张脸，虽然我对看到的早已有所预料，但还是让我几乎跟头一次认出她那阵子一样感到震惊。我想如果你看一张年轻人的脸，甚至一个小孩的脸，你也应该能预见到那张脸变老时会是什么样，全取决于骨骼的形状。但是当我是二十而她是二十五时，就算我想过爱尔西四十七岁时会是什么样，也绝对想象不到她会成长成那样。她整张脸都有点儿下垂，好像不知怎么被往下拉扯过。有些中年女人的脸长得就跟斗牛犬一模一样，你知道吗？大大的下巴往下垂着，嘴角下撇，眼睛深陷，还长着眼袋，跟斗牛犬一模一样，可那还是同一张脸，这种事我见得太多。她的头发还不完全是灰白色，有点儿是脏颜色，而且跟以前比起来，头发要少得多。她完全没有认出我，我无非是个顾客，一个陌生人，一个没意思的胖男人。一两英寸厚的脂肪造成的效果很不一般啊，我怀疑我是不是比她变样得还厉害，或者只是她没想到会见到我，或者——那最有可能——她只是忘了还有我这个人。

“晚上好。”她说，用的就是她们那种人无精打采的口气。

“我想买个烟斗，”我不动声色地说，“树根烟斗。”

“烟斗，让我瞅瞅，我记得我们有些烟斗放在哪儿了。我是放

——啊！这儿呢。”

她从柜台下某个地方拿出一个硬纸盒，里面全是烟斗。她的口音可真难听！要么只是我想象出来的，只因为我自己的水平变了？可是不对，她以前可是很“高级”的，所有在莉莉怀特上班的女孩都“高级”。她曾经也是牧师组织的读书小组的一员，我敢肯定她以前说话是不掉“H”音的。这些女的一结婚就变得不可收拾，真是古怪。我在烟斗里翻了一会儿，装作在找。最后，我说我想要有琥珀嘴的。

“琥珀？我不知道我们有没——”她扭头向铺子后面叫道，“乔——治！”

看来另外一个男人的名字也是乔治。从铺子那里传来一声类似“呃”的声音。

“乔——治！你把那盒烟斗放哪儿了？”

乔治进来了。这是个矮胖的伙计，穿着衬衫，秃头，长着浓密的姜黄色胡须，类似滤汤网。他的下巴还在像反刍一样动着，显然他正在吃着茶点时却被打扰了。他俩开始到处扒拉，找那另一盒烟斗，花了差不多五分钟，才从几个糖瓶后面翻出来。他们在那种肮脏的小铺里攒的垃圾数量之多，令人叹为观止，存货的总价值却不超过五十镑。

我看着老爱尔西在那堆垃圾里扒拉，嘴里还嘟嘟囔囔的。你知不知道一个老女人丢了东西时那种摸摸索索和拱肩曲背的动作？我的感觉跟你说了也没用。那是种冰冷、恐怖、沮丧的感觉，除非你感受到过，否则想象不出来。我只能说：如果你在大约二十五年前喜欢过一个女孩，如今再去看看她吧，也许就会了解我的感觉。

但事实上，我脑子里的主要想法是事情会跟你预料的有多么不同。我跟爱尔西在一起消磨了多少时间啊！多少个在栗子树下度过的七月黄昏！你难道不认为会留下一些痕迹吗？谁曾想到有一天我们之间会不再有任何感情？我在这边，她在那边，我们的身体可能有一码

之隔，却只像是从来没见过面的陌生人。至于她，则根本没认出我，如果我告诉她我是谁，很可能她不记得。假如她记得，她会有什么感觉呢？不过是空白而已，大概也不会因为我耍弄过她而愤怒，似乎整件事从未发生过。

另一方面，谁能料到爱尔西会变成这样？她曾经像是那种注定会堕落到底的女孩。我知道在我拥有她之前，她至少还跟过另外一个男人，而且保险地说，在我和另一位乔治之间，还有过其他人。我就算知道她总共跟过一打男人，也不会感到惊奇。我对她不好，那毫无疑问，很多次想起她，我都会难受一阵子。我想过她会沦落到卖身为生，要么吸煤气自尽。有时候我觉得自己是个混蛋，但在别的时候，我想（也确实如此）就算不是我，也会是别人。可是你也了解了世事是怎样变化的，是以那种枯燥而毫无意义的方式。有多少女的真的落到卖身为生？有他妈多得多的女人嫁为人妇，在洗洗熨熨中度日。她没变坏，也没变好，无非跟每个人的下场一样，成了在一间又小又脏的铺子里混日子的人，有自己的长着姜黄色胡子的乔治。她大概还有一串孩子。乔治·库肯太太，生前受人尊重，死后有人哀悼——运气好的话，可能死在上破产法庭之前。

他们找到那盒烟斗，当然，里面没有带琥珀嘴的。

“我想只是眼下我们这儿没有琥珀嘴的了，没琥珀嘴的，有些硬橡胶嘴的。”

“我想买个琥珀嘴的。”我说。

“我们这儿有些也不错，”她拿出来一根，“您看这根还不错，价钱是半克朗，就这根。”

我接过来，我们的手指刚好碰到一起，没有兴奋，没有反应，身体不记得了。我想你以为我买了那根烟斗，只是念旧情，往爱尔西的口袋里放进半克朗，可是你全错了。我不想要那件东西，我又不用烟斗抽烟，无非是想找个借口进到铺子里而已。我用手指把它掉个头放在柜台上。

“没关系，我不买了，”我说，“给我拿一小包球员牌烟吧。”

忙乎半天，总得买点儿什么。那第二个乔治——要么是第三个或第四个——递过一包球员牌香烟，胡子下面还在咀嚼。我能看出他有点儿愠气，因为我在他正用茶点时把他拉了过来，却几乎没买东西，但是浪费半个克朗的话，可就太他妈傻了。我走了，那是我最后一次见到爱尔西。

我回到乔治旅馆，吃了饭。后来出来了，心里多少想着电影院开门的话，就去看场电影，可是我到了镇上新区的一间很大很吵的酒馆里落了脚。在那里，我碰到两个从斯塔福德郡¹¹⁵来的伙计，他们是五金旅行推销员。我们聊了生意，玩了飞镖，还喝了黑啤。到打烊时，他们都喝得太醉，以至于我只能叫辆出租车把他们送回去。我自己也有些不舒服，第二天早上醒来时头疼，疼得前所未有。

五

可是我一定要去看看宾菲尔德大屋的那个池塘。

那天早晨我感觉很糟糕。事实上，自从我来到下宾菲尔德，几乎每天都是不间断地从酒吧开门一直喝到打烊为止。其中原因我当时没想到，这会儿才想起来。其实是因为也没有别的事情可做。这就是我到那时为止三天的总结——酗酒三天。

跟前一天一样，我爬起来到了窗前，看圆顶礼帽和校帽匆匆来往。那是我的敌人，我想。他们就是洗劫了这个镇，并在废墟上扔满烟屁股和纸袋子的占领军。我不知道我干吗要在乎，我敢说在你看来，如果我因为发现下宾菲尔德扩张成了像戴根纳姆¹¹⁶那种地方而吃惊，无非是因为我不想看到地球上的人越来越多，乡村变成了城镇。但根本不是这样。我并不介意镇子扩大，只要真的是扩大了，而不是仅仅像肉汁在台布上一样到处流淌。我知道人们总得有地方住，工厂没在这里，也会在别的地方。至于风景如画风格、伪乡村化的玩意儿、橡木镶板、白镏盘和铜制长柄暖炉之类，只能叫我恶心。不管那年头我们怎么样，但肯定不是风景如画。我妈永远也不会明白温迪在

我们家房子里放满古董有何道理。她不喜欢有活动腿的桌子——说那“夹腿”，至于白镏器皿，她在家从来不用，用她的话说，那是“恶心的油腻玩意儿”。可是不管你想说什么，我们以前有过一些现在没有了的东西，一些你大概不会在开着收音机的最新潮牛奶吧里找到的东西。我回来，就是为了寻找那个，但是还没有找到。然而不管怎么样，甚至那会儿，我还有些相信其存在，即使当时我还没有戴上假牙，肚子也在咕咕作响，需要一粒阿司匹林和一杯茶水。

可那又让我想起宾菲尔德大屋的池塘。在看过他们把镇子搞成什么样之后，我对去看那个池塘是否还存在一事上，有种只能用恐惧来形容的感觉。但是仍有可能存在，不看不知道。这个镇子已被埋在红砖头之下，我们的房子被温迪和她的垃圾填满了，泰晤士河被马达油和纸袋子所污染。不过，那个池塘还可能在那里，黑色的鱼仍在其中巡游。甚至有可能从那时起直到现在，它一直隐藏在树林中，没人发现过有那么一个池塘。很有可能。因为那是一片十分茂密的树林，长满刺藤和腐烂的灯芯草（那里附近是橡树而不是山毛榉树，所以下层灌木长得很密实），大多数人不愿意进去。比这更离奇的事情还有呢。

我直到下午较晚时才开路，把车弄出来开上宾菲尔德那条路时，可能有四点半。到了半山腰，房子稀疏了一些，最后没有了，接着是山毛榉树林。路在那里分岔了，我选了右边那条，意味着要兜个圈，最终回来开到路边的宾菲尔德大屋。那时，我停下来看我正在穿过的矮树林。那些山毛榉树看上去好像还是原先的样子。天哪，可不是一点儿都没变！我把车倒到路边的一片草地上，然后下了车，就在一个白垩石的断面下。我下了车开始走路。一点儿没变，一样的宁静，一样面积阔、沙沙响的落叶，好像年复一年没有烂掉。除了几只在树梢那里看不见的小鸟，没有任何活物弄出响动。很难相信不足三英里外便是嘈杂无比的镇子。我开始穿过那一小片矮树林向宾菲尔德大屋走去。我模模糊糊记得小路原来的方向。天哪！没错！那就是当年“黑手党”去过的同一个白垩坑，还在那里打过弹弓呢，锡德·拉夫格鲁夫在那里告诉我们小孩是怎样生出来的。那天，我还钓到了平生所钓的第一条鱼，已经是快四十年前的事了！

树木又变得稀疏时，就能看到另外一条路，还能看到宾菲尔德大屋。原先的木头围栏当然没了，而是垒起一道砖头高墙，上面插着尖钉子，在疯人院周围看到这些属意料之中。一开始，我感觉不知道怎样才能进到宾菲尔德大屋里面，最后突然想到只用告诉他们我老婆疯了，我正在找地方安置她就行了。那样说了后，他们就会很乐意领我在庭院里参观一下。我穿着新套装，大概能让别人当成是个有钱人，负担得起把老婆送进私营精神病院。一直到了大门那里，我才开始琢磨那个池塘还在没在里面。

我想宾菲尔德大屋以前的庭院占地有五十英亩，但疯人院的院子不大可能超过五到十英亩。他们不会保留一个大池塘让疯子把自个儿淹死。小屋——就是荷吉斯老头以前住过的——还跟以前一样，可是黄砖墙和大铁门是新的。单凭透过大门往里面瞄一眼，我会认不出那个地方。里面有沙砾道、花圃、草坪和几个无头苍蝇一样来回走动的人——我想是疯子。我溜达上了右边的路。那个池塘——大的，就是我以前去钓鱼的那个——在房子后面二百码。离那道围墙的拐角处可能还有一百码，这么着池塘是在院外面了。树木好像稀疏得多，能听到小孩子的声音。哎呀！那就是池塘嘛。

我在那里站了一会儿，琢磨他们是把池塘怎么了。然后我看出来是怎么回事——池塘边的树木都没了，看上去空荡荡的，跟以前不一样。事实上，看上去跟肯辛顿公园¹¹⁷里的圆池塘很像。小孩儿在池塘周围玩帆船和玩水，还有几个年龄大得多的小孩儿乘着划子，很快地划来划去，就是那种可以用手柄操纵的。左边是当年那间腐烂的船屋在水草中所在的地方，如今那里有个亭子和卖甜品的凉亭，一个很大的白色牌子上写着：“上宾菲尔德艇模俱乐部”。

我往右边看去，全是房子，房子，说这里是城市的远郊也行。池塘那边的树林全砍光了，以前长得很密，好像热带丛林，如今却只有几丛树仍在房子周围。那是看上去有些艺术样的房子，跟我第一天在查姆福特山顶看到的另一片一样，这又是一片假冒都铎风格¹¹⁸聚居地，无非更假。我本来想象这树林还是老样子，可真是个小傻帽儿！我看出来是怎么回事。那里只有一小片矮树丛没砍完，可能有六英亩

地。我走过来时穿过那里纯粹是碰巧。在那年头，上宾菲尔德只是个地名，如今却成了一个相当规模的镇子，事实上，它只不过是下宾菲尔德分出来的一块地方。

我漫步到了池塘边上。小孩子在拍水，喧闹震天。他们好像有几大群。水看来有些像是死水，现在里面没鱼了。有个伙计站在那里看着小孩子。他是个上了点儿年纪的伙计，秃顶，还有几缕白头发，戴着夹鼻眼镜，脸上晒得很黑。他的模样隐隐约约有种古怪之处。他穿着短裤、凉鞋和那种开领的人造丝衬衫，我都看到了，但真正让我吃惊的，是他眼里的那种神色。他的眼睛很蓝，有点儿像是在眼镜后面向你眨着。我看出他是那种永远长不大的老头儿，他们要么是只吃健康食品的怪人，要么干的事跟童子军有关——不管哪一样，他们都是极热衷于大自然和室外活动的人。他看着我，好像要说话。

“上宾菲尔德扩大了不少啊。”我说。

他向我眨了眨眼睛。

“扩大！亲爱的先生啊，我们从来不让上宾菲尔德扩大。你也知道，我们在这儿，作为跟大家很不一样的人深感自豪。只是我们自己的聚居地，没有不请自来的人——嘿嘿！”

“我是说跟战前比起来。”我说，“我以前还是个小孩子时，就住这儿。”

“噢，那肯定，当然，那也是在我到这儿之前。不过在住宅区里面，上宾菲尔德很与众不同。它全部由年轻的爱德华·沃特金设计，他是建筑师。当然，你肯定听说过他。我们在这儿，就住在大自然当中，跟下面那个镇子没联系。”——他的手挥向下宾菲尔德方向——“那个黑暗的肮脏地方——嘿嘿！”

他咯咯笑得很和蔼，还会把脸上弄得全是褶子，像只兔子一样。好像我请教了他似的，他马上跟我讲起上宾菲尔德住宅区和年轻的爱德华·沃德金，就是那个建筑师的事。此人对都铎风格很有感觉，他在

旧农舍里发现一些真正的伊丽莎白时代¹¹⁹的木梁，然后用离谱的价格买下，在这方面，他是个很棒的家伙。他还是个很有趣的年轻人，是裸体主义者聚会上的主要灵魂和活力所在。他重复了很多遍他们在上宾菲尔德的人很出色，跟下宾菲尔德的人很不一样。他们决心给乡村添姿加彩，而不是玷污（我用的是他的原话），而且住宅区里没有办理公共事务的房子。

“有人说他们的是‘田园城市’，可是我们称上宾菲尔德为‘森林城市’——嘿嘿！大自然！”他向那片幸存下来的树林挥手说道，“原始森林笼罩着我们，我们的年青一代在大自然美景的怀抱中长大。当然，我们几乎全部都是文化人。我们中间有四分之三都是吃素的，你不觉得很了不起吗？这儿的屠户一点儿都不喜欢我们——嘿嘿！有些很著名的人也住在这儿。小说家海伦娜·瑟鲁小姐——你当然听说过她；还有伍德教授，搞心理研究的。多有诗意的人！他出去在树林中漫步，家里人吃饭时候找不着他，他说他在仙境里散步。你相信仙境吗？我承认——嘿嘿！——我有过那么一点点怀疑，但是他拍的照片太有说服力了。”

我开始琢磨他是不是从宾菲尔德大屋里跑出来的。可是不对，勉强说来，他的神经还挺正常的。我知道那种人：素食主义者，过简朴生活，有诗意，热爱大自然，早餐前还要去吸一口露水珠。我前几年在伊灵区见过几个那样的。他开始领我参观住宅区。里面的树木一棵也没留下，全是房子，房子——都是些什么房子呀！你知不知道那种伪都铎风格的房子？房顶是有波纹的屋顶，还有什么也没扶着的扶壁，有小鸟洗澡盆和在花店买的石膏制精灵以及假山庭院。闭上眼睛就能想象数目庞大的那一群人，他们中间有吃东西怪癖的，装神弄鬼的，过简单生活的，住在那里一年要花一千镑。就连人行道也莫名其妙。我没让他再蒙我。有那么几座房子，让我恨不得兜里有颗手榴弹。我想给他降降温，就问他那些人介不介意这么挨着精神病院住，可是没什么效果。最后，我打断他的话问道：

“以前那边还有个池塘，就挨着那个大的，走过去不会太远。”

“还有个池塘？噢，肯定没有。我想从来没有过另外一个池塘。”

“他们可能把它抽干了，”我说，“是个很深的池塘，会留下一个大坑。”

他第一次显得有点儿不安，抹了下鼻子。

“噢，当然，你肯定明白这儿的生活从某些方面上说是朴素原始的。简单生活，你也知道。我们宁愿这样过，可是因为离镇上这么远，也有些不方便之处，这是当然的。我们有些卫生设施还不算完全让人满意。垃圾车一个月才来一次，我想是吧。”

“你是说他们把那个池塘变成了垃圾场？”

“这个嘛，有那么一点儿性质是——”他回避了垃圾场这个词，“当然，我们得有地方放罐头瓶什么的。就在那边，树丛后边。”

我们走到那边。他们留下几棵树好挡住它，不过没错，那就是。我的池塘，好哇。他们把水抽干了，留下一个很深的圆坑，像口巨大的水井，有二三十英尺深，已经有一半是罐头瓶了。

我站在那里看着那些罐头瓶。

“可惜他们把水抽干了，”我说，“以前这个池塘的鱼很大。”

“鱼？噢，我可从来都没听说过。当然，我们也不大可能在房子中间保留这么一池子水，长蚊子，你也知道。不过那是我来这儿之前的事了。”

“我想这些房子盖了很久吧？”我问。

“噢——十到十五年吧，我觉着有。”

“我知道这地方战前的样子。”我说，“那时这儿全是树林。除了宾菲尔德大屋没别的房子，可是那边的矮树丛没变，我来的时候穿过了那儿。”

“啊，那个！那可是神圣不可侵犯。我们决定永远不在那儿盖房子。它对年轻人来说是块圣地。大自然，你也知道。”他对我眨了眨眼睛，有点儿调皮的样子，像是在向我透露一个小秘密：“我们叫它‘小精灵格伦’。”

“小精灵格伦”。我撂下他，回到汽车那儿往下开回下宾菲尔德。“小精灵格伦”。他们把我的池塘填满了罐头瓶，让他们遭天打雷劈吧！你想说什么随便你——说这是愚蠢、孩子气，什么都行——可是看到他们对英格兰的所作所为，难道有时候不让你恶心得要吐吗？他们的小鸟洗澡池和石膏土地神，还有小精灵和罐头瓶等等，可是以前的山毛榉树林呢？

多愁善感，你说的？反社会？不该爱树甚于爱人？我要说，那得看是什么树和什么人。但是除了咒他们发瘟长疮，谁也没办法。

开车下山时，我在想一件事，那就是我算是再也不会会有这种回到过去的想法了。想重温那些童年景象又有什么用？不复存在了。上来透口气！但现在是没空气了，我们身处其中的垃圾箱高到了平流层。但同时，我也不是特别在乎。我想，不管怎么样，还剩下三天时间。我要享受点儿平和与宁静，不再费事去想他们把下宾菲尔德怎么样了。至于那个去钓鱼的想法——不用说，已经烟消云散。钓鱼，真是的！就我这把年纪！没错，希尔达说对了。

把车丢到乔治旅馆的车库后，我走进了休息室。那时是六点钟，有人打开了无线电，新闻已经开始，我进门时，刚好赶上听到寻人启事的最后几个字。我承认它让我心里一惊，因为我听到的几个字是：

“——他的妻子，希尔达·保灵正患重病。”

接下来，那故作浑厚的声音又开始了：“下面是另一则寻人启事：威尔·帕西沃·屈特，关于他的最后消息，是在——”可我没有再停下来听，而是一直往前走。后来想到并让我觉得很自豪的，是在听到喇叭里传来的那句话时，我连眼睛都没转。我的脚步没有一点儿停顿，以让别人知道我是乔治·保灵，老婆希尔达·保灵正在生重病。老

老板娘在休息室，她知道我是乔治·保灵，反正她会在登记簿上看到。那里另外只有一两个乔治旅馆的住客，跟我陌不相识。但我神色自如，没向任何人流露什么，只是继续走进酒吧单间，那里刚刚开始营业。跟以往一样，我要了一品脱啤酒。

我得考虑一下。差不多喝完半品脱啤酒时，我开始弄明白了事情的来龙去脉。首先，希尔达根本没病，不管轻病还是重病，我知道。我走时她还活蹦乱跳的，而且不是流感之类的发病季节。她在装病，为什么？

显而易见，那是她的又一个花招。我看出来是怎么回事：她不知怎么得到了风声——相信希尔达好了！——说我不是真的在伯明翰，那无非是想让我回家。想着我跟别的女人在一起，让她一刻也受不了，因为她想当然认为我是跟女人在一起，她想不出别的动机。很自然，她估计我听到她病了，会马上赶回家。

可正是在这点上，你搞错了，喝完那一品脱啤酒时我在想。我太精了，甭指望那样就能蒙住我。我记得她以前耍过的花招，另外她为了揭穿我，可谓费尽心力。我甚至知道她如果对我某趟出差有怀疑的话，会去查列车时刻表和地图，只是为了看我对自己的活动是不是说了假话。有那么一次，她一路跟踪我到了科尔切斯特，然后在坦普伦斯旅馆突然冲进我的房间。至于这一次，不幸的是她刚好猜对了——说到底，她是猜错了，但种种迹象看来好像她猜对了。我一点儿也不相信她生了病。事实上，我知道她没病，虽然我说不清楚是怎么知道的。

我又喝了一品脱啤酒，情况看来好了点儿。我回家后，当然会有场架要吵，可是不管怎么样，反正都会吵。我想我还能等待足足三天。很耐人寻味的是，既然我已经发现了来寻找的东西都不存在，那时候休点儿假好像对我更有吸引力了。不回家——这是件大好事。远离爱着的人，平和，绝对的平和，那是圣歌里唱的。突然，我决定想的话，就是要去找个女人。既然希尔达这样不住好里想，就让她活该被骗，再说，要是没有那事却偏被怀疑，岂不是太没道理？

但是当第二品脱啤酒在我体内起作用后，这件事开始让我觉得很逗。我没有中计，不过这也太他妈有创意了，天才。我在琢磨她怎么安排播出寻人启事，我完全不知道得办什么手续。需要医生证明吗？要么只用报个名字就行了？我很有把握是姓威勒的女人怂恿她干的，在我看来，那有点儿威勒的风格。

可是不管怎么样，这可真够损的！女人真是无不用其极！有时候，你不得不佩服她们。

六

早餐后，我出去溜达到了市场上。那天上午天气很好，有点儿凉爽，没有风，黄白色的阳光像白葡萄酒一样沐浴着万物。那天早晨的新鲜空气跟我的雪茄味混合到一起，但是从房子后面传来了嗡嗡声，突然，一队巨大的黑色轰炸机嗡嗡飞来了。我抬起头看，轰炸机好像正在头顶。

紧接着，我听到什么声音。与此同时，你要是刚好在那里，就会看到一个我相信叫作条件反射的例子。因为我听到的——一点儿都不可能听错——是炸弹的哨声。那种声音我有二十年没有听过了，可是不用别人告诉我是什么。我什么都没想，就采取了正确的举动——脸朝下扑倒在地。

不管怎样，我挺高兴你看不到我的样子，我想我看上去没什么尊严。我贴在人行道上，像个被夹在门下面的耗子。别人的动作连我的一半快也没有。我行动得如此之快，以至于当炸弹在响着哨往下掉时，我甚至有点儿害怕是我弄错了，无端傻了一回。

但是紧接着——啊！

“咚——啪啦啦！”

那就像末日审判的声音，接下来像是一吨煤给倒在一张铁皮上，那是落下的砖块。我好像要融化在人行道上。“开始了，”我心想，“我知道！希特勒这厮不等了，不吭声就把轰炸机派来了。”

但在当时，还发生了一件奇怪的事。就算在那吓人、震耳欲聋、噼里啪啦的回响里——它好像把我从脑袋到脚趾全冻实在了——我还有时间想着大型炸弹爆炸时的不胜壮观之处。声音像什么？很难说，因为你听到的，是你所害怕的声音混合在一起，主要是它向你展现了金属爆破的景象，你好像看到一张面积极大的铁皮裂开了。但奇怪的是，你感觉突然被推至现实面前，如同有人兜头泼了你一桶凉水，你突然被金属的咣当声拉出梦境。可怕，但是真实。

传来尖叫和呼喊的声音，还有汽车急刹车的声音。我等待的第二颗炸弹没落下来。我把头抬起一点点。两边街道上，人们好像都在尖叫着跑来跑去，一辆车打着滑斜冲过路面。我能听到一个女人的尖叫：“德国人！德国人！”右边，我模模糊糊看到一个男人白色的圆脸，很像是个有皱纹的纸袋子，他低头看着我，有点儿惊慌失措：

“怎么回事？怎么了？他们在干吗？”

“开始了，”我说，“是炸弹。你趴下。”

但第二颗炸弹还是没有落下来，过了十几秒，我又抬起头。有些人还在跑来跑去，别的人站着，像是被粘在原地。房子后面升起很大的尘雾，中间有一股黑烟向上涌着。接着，我看到了不寻常的景象。在市场的另一端，大街升起来一点点。这边的小山上，有一群猪在飞奔，猪脸像是洪流一样袭卷而来。当然紧接着，我就看明白了是什么。根本不是猪，只是戴着防毒面罩的学童，我想他们是在冲向某处地下室，有人告诉过他们万一空袭时去那里躲。他们后面，我甚至看到有头高一点儿的猪，大概是托杰斯小姐。可我告诉你有那么一会儿，他们跟猪一模一样。

我站起身穿过市场。人们已经开始冷静下来，很多人开始往炸弹掉下的地方拥去。

噢，没错，你是对的，这不用说。那到底不是德国的飞机，战争还没有爆发，只是一次事故而已。飞机在进行轰炸演习——反正是带了炸弹——有人不小心把手放到了控制杆上，我想他会为此被狠批一

顿。等到邮局局长打电话去伦敦问是不是已经开战，并被告知没有时，谁都明白了那是一次事故。但是有那么一刻，在一到五分钟之间，当时有几千人相信我们已身处战争之中。还好，这种感觉没有拖下去，再拖上一刻钟的话，我们就要开始用私刑干掉我们当中潜伏的间谍了。

我跟着人群走过去。那颗炸弹掉在接着大街的一条小小偏街上，也就是伊齐其尔叔叔的铺子曾经所在的那条，掉炸弹的地方跟原来铺子的位置不足五十码远。转过街角时，我能听到“哦——哦”的声音——是种害怕的声音，好像那些人被吓了一大跳，当时正兴奋得不得了。幸好，我比救护车和消防车早了几分钟，虽然当时已经聚集了五十个人左右，我还是全看到了。

第一眼看去，好像是天上下了一阵砖头和蔬菜雨，到处是卷心菜叶。炸弹炸平了一间杂货铺，挨着它右边房子一半的房顶给炸没了，顶梁在着火，周围房屋多少都遭到破坏，窗户全碎了。但是人们都在观看的房屋在左边，它接着杂货铺的一面墙就像被人用刀子割的一样，整整齐齐全切掉了。而且更不寻常的是，楼上房间好像一点儿都没动，像个玩具屋一样。五斗橱，卧室椅，褪色的墙纸，还没有收拾的床和床底的一把夜壶——全跟有人住时一模一样，只是一面墙没了。但下面的房间受到了爆炸的冲击，里面乱得可怕，什么东西都有：砖块，灰泥，椅子腿，漆过清漆的梳妆台，桌布碎片，几堆碎盘子和几大块洗涤槽碎块。一罐果酱滚过地板，留下一长道果酱印，与其并行的是一溜血迹。但在那边的碎陶器中有条人腿，只是条人腿，还穿着裤子和一只钉了伍德—迈尔尼牌橡胶鞋根的黑靴子。所以人们在那里大呼小叫。

我好好看了一眼后全都记在心里。血迹快要跟果酱混了起来。消防车赶到时，我走了，回到乔治旅馆后就开始收拾东西。

我想，那就能让我和下宾菲尔德的关系到此为止。我要回家，但实际上，我不是马上就愤然离开，谁都不会。像那种事情发生后，人们总是在附近站着讨论几个钟头。那天在下宾菲尔德老镇子那部分没

有人干活，每个人都在就炸弹谈论个没完，它的响声如何，和他们听到时以为怎么回事等等。乔治旅馆的酒吧服务员说那让她吓得发抖，说从此以后她晚上都会睡不好觉，她还说能有什么指望，那只不过说明了现在有了炸弹，谁也不晓得会怎么样。有个女的因为听到爆炸跳了起来，结果把舌头咬掉了半拉。后来我发现镇子这头的每个人都想象是德国的空袭，而镇子那头的人都想当然以为是制袜厂发生了爆炸。后来（我从报纸上读到的），空军部的人派了个伙计来视察破坏程度，提交了一份报告，说炸弹的效力“令人失望”，事实上只炸死了三个人：那个杂货店主，名字叫帕罗特，还有住在房边上的一对老夫妇。那个女的没有被炸得粉身碎骨，通过靴子也辨认出了那个老头，可是他们从来没有发现帕罗特的一丁点儿东西，甚至没有一粒裤子纽扣可以对着它致悼词。

下午，我结了账就走人了，之后剩的钱不足三镑。这种装修过的乡村旅馆在从你口袋里赚钱方面有一套，我在喝酒和其他零七杂八的东西上也大手大脚过。我把那根新鱼竿和别的钓具留在房间里，让别人用吧，对我已经没用，无非算是一镑钱打了水漂，给自己买个教训，而且这教训可是够深刻的。四十五岁的胖男人不可能去钓鱼，那种事情不会再有了，无非是一场梦而已，一直到死，我都不会再钓鱼了。

理解事情是一步步的，这点很有趣。炸弹爆炸时，我真正的感觉是什么？当然，在那一刹那，我被吓得魂飞魄散，但是等我看到炸碎了的房子和老头的腿时，我有种类似看街上交通事故时有过的不大不小的兴奋感。让人恶心，这不用说，也足以让我受够了这次所谓的休假，可它说不上真的给我留下什么印象。

但是当我开出下宾菲尔德的镇郊并向东拐时，那种感觉全回来了。你也知道一个人开车时的感觉。要么是因为飞快向后闪去的树篱，要么是发动机的突突声，让你的思维也以某种节奏进行。你有了跟偶尔坐火车时一样的感觉，那是种能以比平时好点儿的角度看问题时的感觉，所有我以前怀疑过的东西现在对其有了把握。第一件，我回到下宾菲尔德时，脑子里带着一个问题：我们以后会遇到什么？真

的全玩完了吗？能找回以前的生活方式吗？要么是一去不复回了？这个嘛，我已经有了答案。旧的生活方式的确是玩完了，到处去寻找它，那纯粹是浪费时间。没办法再回到下宾菲尔德，就像不能再把约拿弄进鲸鱼的肚子。我以前就知道了，可是我不指望你会顺着我的思路想。至于我所做的回去这件事很古怪。下宾菲尔德本来已被塞进我脑子里的不知哪个角落，是那种安静的角落，我想的话，就可以踏进那里，最后我踏进去时，却发现它已不复存在。我往我的梦境里扔了颗手雷，以防皇家空军再出个岔子，丢下五百磅烈性炸药。

战争就快来了，人们说，是在一九四一年。将有更多陶器被打碎，小房子会被像包装箱一样扯开来，注册会计师的肚肠会洒在他分期付款购买的钢琴上。但是不管怎么样，那些事情重要吗？我要告诉你，我在下宾菲尔德的逗留已经给了我教训，也就是：那都是要来的。包括所有你已置于脑后的东西，让你害怕不已的东西，那些你告诉自己只是个噩梦，或者发生在国外的事情：炸弹，领食物的队伍，胶皮警棍，带刺铁丝网，囚衣，标语，大面孔，从睡房里往外嗒嗒射击的机关枪等等，那都是即将到来的。我知道——反正我当时知道。逃无可逃。你想的话，就跟它对抗吧，要么你把目光转向别处，假装没有看到，要么你也抓把扳手冲出去跟别人一起多少砸些人脸。但是 you 无法置身事外，那正是在劫难逃。

我踩下油门，老爷车嗖嗖地冲上冲下小山，奶牛群、榆树和麦田飞快地向后闪去，直到发动机差不多变得炽热。我感觉我处于一月份那天沿着滨河大街溜达时同样的精神状态。就是在那一天，我拿到了新假牙。似乎从那时起，我被赋予一种预言的能力，似乎我能看到整个英国，还有住在这里的每个人，以及发生在他们身上的所有事情。当然有时候，即使在当时也是，我还有点儿怀疑。世界太辽阔了，开着车到处去时，你会注意到这一点，从某种意义上来说，那让人放心。想想要是你穿过英国某郡一角时能看到的广袤无边的大地吧，就像是在西伯利亚。还有田地、山毛榉树林、农舍、教堂以及有着小杂货铺、教区会堂和穿过草地的鸭子的村子。难道那不是太大了，乃至无法被改变？肯定多少会保持原来的样子。不久，我到了外伦敦，我一直顺着阿克斯桥路开，直到索瑟尔¹²⁰才转向。一英里又一英里全是

丑陋的房子，他们在里面过着体面却枯燥的生活。过了那里，伦敦延伸啊延伸：街道，广场，小巷，公寓，一座座楼房、酒馆、炸鱼铺、电影院——延伸啊延伸，一直有二十英里，还有过着自成一统生活的八百万人，他们并不想改变那种生活。能把这些连根抹去的炸弹还没有造出来。看那个嘈杂劲儿！看那些人的生活多么自成一统！约翰·史密斯正在剪足球票优惠券，比尔·威廉斯在理发店跟人交流故事，琼斯太太¹²¹拎着晚饭时喝的啤酒。有八百万人！管它有没有炸弹，他们反正会继续过他们已经习以为常的生活，难道不是吗？

幻觉！胡扯！管他有多少人，他们无一例外都会那样过。坏日子就要来了，那些最新型的人也要来了，然后再来什么我不知道，我也几乎毫无兴趣。我只知道你要是对任何东西还有一点在乎的话，最好现在就跟它说再见，因为你所知道的，是一切会往下掉，往下掉，一直掉进臭垃圾堆，而机关枪还无时不在嗒嗒响着。

七

回到郊区时，我的心情突然变了个样。

我突然想到——在那之前根本想都没有想到过——希尔达有可能真的病了。

你看，这就是环境的影响。在下宾菲尔德时，我绝对是想当然以为她没事，只是没病装病，好骗我回家。当时我这样想似乎很合理，也不知道为什么。可是我等开车进入西布莱奇里时，包围着我的赫斯派莱兹住宅区像座红砖墙的监狱，事实上它就是座监狱。当时，那些习惯成自然的想法又出现了，我又有了星期一早上时的感觉，一切看来都惨淡没劲。我明白了像我那样，在过去五天里所干的事真是荒唐到了操蛋的程度。什么溜到下宾菲尔德试着找回从前，还想着一大堆预见前景如何的瞎扯淡。什么前景！前景跟像你我这样的伙计有何关系？保住工作——这就是我们的前景。至于希尔达，就算炸弹往下掉，她还会操心黄油多少钱一镑呢。

突然，我也明白了我真是个笨蛋，蠢到以为她会做那种事。寻人

启事当然不是骗人的！还真的以为她有那种想象力呢！这是件确凿无误的事实。她根本没装病，而是真的病了。哎呀！这会儿她说不定正痛得要命地躺着呢，甚至可能已经死了，我想到的只有这两种可能。这个想法让我全身心感到极度惊怕，感到阵阵瘆人的寒意。我在艾里斯米尔路上横冲直撞，车速几乎达到四十英里。不像往常那样把车开进锁着的车库里，而是停在房子外面就跳了下来。

你会说了，我毕竟还是很爱希尔达的对不对？我不知道你说的很爱是什么意思。你很爱自己的脸庞吗？大概不，可你不能想象没了脸庞，它是你的一部分。我对希尔达就是这种感觉。平白无故时，我看不想看看到她，可是想到她可能死了，甚至是她正忍受痛楚，就能把我吓得浑身发抖。

我摸索着掏出钥匙，打开门，扑面而来的，是熟悉的旧雨衣气味。

“希尔达！”我喊着，“希尔达！”

没人搭腔，有一会儿，我喊着“希尔达！希尔达”时，周围一片静悄悄，我的背上冒出冷汗。也许他们已经用车把她送到医院——也有可能在这间空屋的楼上，躺着一具尸体。

我开始冲上楼，可就在同时，两个孩子穿着睡衣从他们位于楼梯平台两边的房间里出来了。我想那会儿有八九点钟——反正天开始黑透了。劳娜的手抓着栏杆。

“噢，爸爸！噢，是爸爸！你干吗今天回来了？妈妈说你到星期五才回来。”

“你妈妈呢？”我问。

“妈妈出去了，跟威勒太太一起出去了。爸爸，你干吗今天回来了？”

“这么说你妈妈没病？”

“没有，谁说她病了？爸爸！你去过伯明翰了吗？”

“对，现在回床上睡觉吧，会着凉的。”

“可是你给我们的礼物呢，爸爸？”

“什么礼物？”

“从伯明翰带给我们的礼物呀。”

“明天早上再看吧。”我说。

“噢，爸爸！今天晚上给我们看看不行吗？”

“不行，别废话了，回去上床睡觉，要不给你们两个都揍一顿。”

这么说她到底是没有病，一直在骗我啊。那会儿我真的不知道该高兴还是伤心。我转身看着前门，进来时我没有关上。那不是吗，活生生的希尔达正从院子的小路上走过来。

我就着最后一丝余晖看到希尔达向我走来。想来奇怪，不到三分钟前，我正处于魂飞魄散的状态，背上真的有冷汗冒出来，也就是想着她可能死了的那会儿。是啊，她没死，还是那副老样子。肩膀瘦削的希尔达，脸上一副焦急样，还有煤气账单、学费、雨衣味、星期一去上班——回来所有要面对的，就是这些一成不变的现实，波提欧斯老先生会说那是“永恒的道德准则”。看得出，希尔达那会儿脾气不是太好。她瞟了我一眼，她心里有想法时，就会那样看我，比如说黄鼠狼之类的瘦小动物也有可能那样看人。但是她看到我回来，没有显得吃惊。

“哦，你回来了是吧？”她说。

我回来了，这显而易见。我没有搭腔，她也没有要亲吻我的样子。

“晚饭没有给你准备什么。”她马上又开口说。这就是希尔达的本

色所在，总能在我刚踏进房门时，说出些让人觉得没劲的话。“我没想着你今天会回来，你只能吃面包和奶酪——可是我想家里没有奶酪了。”

我跟着她走进家里，走进雨衣的气味中。我们进了客厅，我关上门并打开灯。我想好要先开口，知道要是我一开始就说硬话，事情就会好办。

“喂”，我说，“你跟我耍那套把戏到底是他妈什么意思？”

她刚把她的包放到收音机上，有一会儿，她看样子真的吃了一惊。

“什么把戏？你什么意思？”

“发布那个寻人启事！”

“什么寻人启事？乔治，你到底在说什么？”

“你想跟我说你没有发布寻人启事，说你病得很重吗？”

“我当然没有！我怎么会？我又没病，干吗我会那样做？”

我开始向她解释，可是几乎就在我开口之前，我明白了是怎么回事，完全是误会。我只听到寻人启事的最后几个词，显而易见，另有希尔达·保灵其人，我想如果在电话号码簿上查这名字，会查到几十个。这不过是时常发生的一次蠢不可及的误会而已，我还高估了希尔达，以为她有点儿想象力呢，事实上她半点儿也没有。整个事件的高潮，就算是那五分钟左右的时间，当时我以为她死了，发现我还关心她，然而现在都烟消云散。我在解释时，她看着我，从她眼睛里，我看得出就要有麻烦了。接下来她开始问我，用的是我称之为三档的声音。你可能以为那是种恼火和唠唠叨叨的声音，而实际上语气沉静，还有些警惕。

“这么说你在伯明翰的旅馆里听到寻人启事了？”

“对，昨天晚上，从国家广播电台听到的。”

“那你是什么时候离开的伯明翰？”

“当然是今天早上。”（我心里已经把行程计划了一番，以备在需要时，扯个谎搪塞一下。十点钟离开，在考文垂吃午饭，在贝特福德¹²²用下午茶——全都合计好了。）

“这么着你昨天晚上就以为我生了重病，可是直到今天早上才动身，是吗？”

“可是我跟你说我原来以为你没生病，不是解释过了吗？我还以为不过是你又耍了个把戏而已，当时听起来很他妈像是那样。”

“你到底是开路了，我倒真的感到很意外呢！”她说话很带刺，让我知道她还有更多的话要往下说，可她的声音倒是变得更平静：“这么着你是今天早上离开的，对吧？”

“对，我离开时是十点钟左右，在考文垂吃的午饭——”

“那你怎么解释这个？”她突然冲我喊道，同时，她一把扯开她的包，掏出一张纸。她拿着它，好像那是张假支票什么的。

我感觉好像有谁瞅冷子揍了我一拳，我早该想到了！她还是查获了我，那就是证据，案底。我根本不知道那是什么，只知道它证明了我跟某个女人外出的。我一下子泄了气，而之前一刻，我还在威吓她，装出恼火的样子，就因为我无缘无故被从伯明翰拽了回来。这会儿她突然转守为攻，控制了局势，不用你提示，我也知道我当时什么样，我浑身上下都用大字写满了有罪——我知道。可我根本无罪！但这是种习惯，我习惯了是做错的一方。跟你打一百镑的赌，我那会儿连答话时，都不免带着犯了错的样子，我回答道：

“你什么意思？你拿出来的是什么？”

“你看了就知道了。”

我接过来。那是封像是一家公司或律师行寄来的信，我注意到上面的地址跟鲁堡特姆旅馆在同一条街。

“亲爱的太太，”我读道，“参照刚刚收到的您于十八日写的信，我们认为一定是您弄错了。鲁堡特姆旅馆两年前就关门了，改成了一座办公楼。此地没有一处与您丈夫所说的那处旅馆相符。可能——”

我没再往下读，一下子就全明白了。这件事我做得有点儿聪明反被聪明误，不过还有微弱的希望——桑德斯这小子可能忘了寄我那封写着寄自鲁堡特姆旅馆的信，那样的话，我还可能厚着脸皮混过去，可是希尔达马上连这点儿希望都给掐灭了。

“怎么样，乔治，你看到信里是怎么说的？你走的那天，我往鲁堡特姆旅馆写了一封信——噢，只是封短信，问他们你是不是已经到了，你猜我得到的是个什么信儿！根本没有什么鲁堡特姆旅馆！而且我收到了你在同一天，从完全是同一间邮局寄来的信，说你在旅馆里。我想你是叫什么人帮你寄的吧。这就是你在伯明翰干的事！”

“可是你看，希尔达！你全搞错了，不是你想的那样，你不明白。”

“哦，没错，我明白，乔治，我明白得一清二楚。”

“可是你听着，希尔达——”

根本没用，这不用说，碰上的是秉公执法的警察。我甚至不敢看她的眼睛，我转身想出去。

“我要把车开进车库。”我说。

“哦，你别，乔治！你别想就这么脱身，你得待这儿听我要说给你听的话，拜托了。”

“妈的！我总得把车灯打开吧，是不是？已经到了汽车必须开灯的时间，你不是想让我们给罚款吧？”

听到这里，她让我走了。我出来把车灯打开后又进了屋，她还站在那里，活像一尊凶神，她面前的桌子上是那两封信，我的和律师行的。我胆子壮了些，又试了一次。

“听着，希尔达！你对这件事理解得根本不对头，我都可以跟你解释。”

“乔治，我肯定不管什么你都能解释，问题是我会不会相信。”

“可是你在妄下结论！哎，你怎么会想到给旅馆写信？”

“那是威勒太太的主意，结果看来是个很不错的主意。”

“哦，威勒太太，是吗？这么说你不介意让那个贱女人搅和进我们的私事，是吗？”

“我还求之不得呢，还是她提醒我你这星期会去干吗的。她说她好像有感应，现在你也知道，她说对了。她对你很了解呢，乔治。她以前的丈夫跟你简直一模一样。”

“可是希尔达——”

我看着她，她的脸色开始变得有点儿发白，这是在她想着我跟别的女人在一起时，会表现出的样子。别的女人，是就好了！

哎呀！往后的日子我看得可是够清楚的！你也知道会是怎样。难听话唠唠叨叨，随时撒气，光是这样就要几星期时间。然后当你以为已经偃旗息鼓时，又扔来几句恶毒的带刺话。每顿饭总是做得晚，孩子们想知道这都是怎么回事。但真正让我泄气的，是那种精神上的走投无路，就是处于想找到去下宾菲尔德的理由却找不到的情形，这是此时最要我命的。我就是花一星期给希尔达解释我为什么去下宾菲尔德，她还是永远理解不了。在这里，艾里斯米尔路上，到底有谁能理解？哎呀！说到底，我理解自己吗？我对整桩事情越来越没把握。我为什么要去下宾菲尔德？我真的去了那里吗？此时的气氛下，这些只是显得毫无意义。在艾里斯米尔路，除了煤气费账单、学费、煮卷心

菜和星期一的上班，其他全是虚的。

再试一次吧：

“可你听着，希尔达！我知道你是怎么想的，可你完全搞错了，我发誓是你搞错了。”

“哦，不是吧，乔治。要是我错了，你干吗要跟我扯谎？”

这件事还没个完，这不用说。

我来回踱了几步，旧雨衣气味很浓。我干吗要出那样一趟门？既然明白了前尘往事都无关紧要，以前我怎么会为那些操心？不管我可能有过什么动机，现在却几乎完全想不起来。下宾菲尔德旧的生活方式、战争和战后，希特勒，斯大林，炸弹，机关枪，领食物的队伍，胶皮警棍——这些都正在被我忘掉，全是。除了旧雨衣气味中的这场俗气而又等而下之的吵架，什么都不存在。

最后再试一次吧：

“希尔达！你听我说一分钟，好吧，你不知道我这星期去哪儿了，是吗？”

“我不想知道你去哪儿了，我知道你干了什么事，这就够了。”

“可是他妈的——”

完全没用，当然如此。她已经认定我有罪，就要告诉我她认为我是什么人了。这可能要花上她几个钟头，之后还有更多麻烦源源而来，因为她很快就会猜度我会有钱去这一趟，然后会发现我有十七镑私房钱。不到夜里三点，这场架结束不了，没理由不会这样。不用再扮什么清白无辜受伤害的样子了，我只能想出一套最容易让她接受的说法。我在心里研究出三种选择，即：

A.原原本本告诉她我都干吗了，想办法让她相信我。

B.祭起失忆的老法宝。

C.让她继续以为有那么一个女人，任她发落。

可是，真他妈的！我知道该选哪种就好了。

He's dead, but he won't lie down.

——POPULAR SONG

Part I

1

The idea really came to me the day I got my new false teeth.

I remember the morning well. At about a quarter to eight I'd nipped out of bed and got into the bathroom just in time to shut the kids out. It was a beastly January morning, with a dirty yellowish-grey sky. Down below, out of the little square of bathroom window, I could see the ten yards by five of grass, with a privet hedge round it and a bare patch in the middle, that we call the back garden. There's the same back garden, same privets and same grass, behind every house in Ellesmere Road. Only difference—where there are no kids there's no bare patch in the middle.

I was trying to shave with a bluntish razor-blade while the water ran into the bath. My face looked back at me out of the mirror, and underneath, in a tumbler of water on the little shelf over the washbasin, the teeth that belonged in the face. It was the temporary set that Warner, my dentist, had given me to wear while the new ones were being made. I haven't such a bad face, really. It's one of those bricky-red faces that go with butter-coloured hair and pale-blue eyes. I've never gone grey or bald, thank God, and when I've got my teeth in I probably don't look my age, which is forty-five.

Making a mental note to buy razor-blades, I got into the bath and started soaping. I soaped my arms (I've got those kind of pudgy arms that are freckled up to the elbow) and then took the back-brush and soaped my shoulder-blades, which in the ordinary way I

can't reach. It's a nuisance, but there are several parts of my body that I can't reach nowadays. The truth is that I'm inclined to be a little bit on the fat side. I don't mean that I'm like something in a side-show at a fair. My weight isn't much over fourteen stone, and last time I measured round my waist it was either forty-eight or forty-nine, I forget which. And I'm not what they call 'disgustingly' fat, I haven't got one of those bellies that sag half-way down to the knees. It's merely that I'm a little bit broad in the beam, with a tendency to be barrel-shaped. Do you know the active, hearty kind of fat man, the athletic bouncing type that's nicknamed Fatty or Tubby and is always the life and soul of the party? I'm that type. 'Fatty', they mostly call me. Fatty Bowling. George Bowling is my real name.

But at that moment I didn't feel like the life and soul of the party. And it struck me that nowadays I nearly always do have a morose kind of feeling in the early mornings, although I sleep well and my digestion's good. I knew what it was, of course—it was those bloody false teeth. The things were magnified by the water in the tumbler, and they were grinning at me like the teeth in a skull. It gives you a rotten feeling to have your gums meet, a sort of pinched-up, withered feeling like when you've bitten into a sour apple. Besides, say what you will, false teeth are a landmark. When your last natural tooth goes, the time when you can kid yourself that you're a Hollywood sheik is definitely at an end. And I was fat as well as forty-five. As I stood up to soap my crotch I had a look at my figure. It's all rot about fat men being unable to see their feet, but it's a fact that when I stand upright I can only see the front halves of mine. No woman, I thought as I worked the soap round my belly, will ever look twice at me again, unless she's paid to. Not that at that moment I particularly wanted any woman to look twice at me.

But it struck me that this morning there were reasons why I

ought to have been in a better mood. To begin with I wasn't working today. The old car, in which I cover my district (I ought to tell you that I'm in the insurance business. The Flying Salamander. Life, fire, burglary, twins, shipwreck—everything), was temporarily in dock, and though I'd got to look in at the London office to drop some papers, I was really taking the day off to go and fetch my new false teeth. And besides, there was another business that had been in and out of my mind for some time past. This was that I had seventeen quid which nobody else had heard about—nobody in the family, that is. It had happened this way. A chap in our firm, Mellors by name, had got hold of a book called Astrology applied to Horse-racing which proved that it's all a question of the influence of the planets on the colours the jockey is wearing. Well, in some race or other there was a mare called Corsair's Bride, a complete outsider, but her jockey's colour was green, which it seemed was just the colour for the planets that happened to be in the ascendant. Mellors, who was deeply bitten with this astrology business, was putting several quid on the horse and went down on his knees to me to do the same. In the end, chiefly to shut him up, I risked ten bob, though I don't bet as a general rule. Sure enough Corsair's Bride came home in a walk. I forget the exact odds, but my share worked out at seventeen quid. By a kind of instinct—rather queer, and probably indicating another landmark in my life—I just quietly put the money in the bank and said nothing to anybody. I'd never done anything of this kind before. A good husband and father would have spent it on a dress for Hilda (that's my wife) and boots for the kids. But I'd been a good husband and father for fifteen years and I was beginning to get fed up with it.

After I'd soaped myself all over I felt better and lay down in the bath to think about my seventeen quid and what to spend it on. The alternatives, it seemed to me, were either a week-end with a woman

or dribbling it quietly away on odds and ends such as cigars and double whiskies.I'd just turned on some more hot water and was thinking about women and cigars when there was a noise like a herd of buffaloes coming down the two steps that lead to the bathroom.It was the kids,of course.Two kids in a house the size of ours is like a quart of beer in a pint mug.There was a frantic stamping outside and then a yell of agony.

'Dadda!I wanna come in!'

'Well,you can't.Clear out!'

'But dadda!I wanna go somewhere!'

'Go somewhere else,then.Hop it.I'm having my bath.'

'Dad-DA!I wanna GO SOME—WHERE!'

No use!I knew the danger signal.The W.C.is in the bathroom—it would be,of course,in a house like ours.I hooked the plug out of the bath and got partially dry as quickly as I could.As I opened the door,little Billy—my youngest,aged seven—shot past me,dodging the smack which I aimed at his head.It was only when I was nearly dressed and looking for a tie that I discovered that my neck was still soapy.

It's a rotten thing to have a soapy neck.It gives you a disgusting sticky feeling,and the queer thing is that,however carefully you sponge it away,when you've once discovered that your neck is soapy you feel sticky for the rest of the day.I went downstairs in a bad temper and ready to make myself disagreeable.

Our dining-room,like the other dining-rooms in Ellesmere Road,is a poky little place,fourteen feet by twelve,or maybe it's twelve by ten,and the Japanese oak sideboard,with the two empty

decanters and the silver egg-stand that Hilda's mother gave us for a wedding present,doesn't leave much room.Old Hilda was glooming behind the teapot,in her usual state of alarm and dismay because the News Chronicle had announced that the price of butter was going up,or something.She hadn't lighted the gas-fire,and though the windows were shut it was beastly cold.I bent down and put a match to the fire,breathing rather loudly through my nose(bending always makes me puff and blow)as a kind of hint to Hilda.She gave me the little sidelong glance that she always gives me when she thinks I'm doing something extravagant.

Hilda is thirty-nine,and when I first knew her she looked just like a hare.So she does still,but she's got very thin and rather wizened,with a perpetual brooding,worried look in her eyes,and when she's more upset than usual she's got a trick of humping her shoulders and folding her arms across her breast,like an old gypsy woman over her fire.She's one of those people who get their main kick in life out of foreseeing disasters.Only petty disasters,of course.As for wars,earthquakes,plagues,famines and revolutions,she pays no attention to them.Butter is going up,and the gas-bill is enormous,and the kids'boots are wearing out,and there's another instalment due on the radio—that's Hilda's litany.She gets what I've finally decided is a definite pleasure out of rocking herself to and fro with her arms across her breast,and glooming at me,'But,George,it's very SERIOUS!I don't know what we're going to DO!I don't know where the money's coming from!You don't seem to realise how serious it IS!'and so on and so forth.It's fixed firmly in her head that we shall end up in the workhouse.The funny thing is that if we ever do get to the workhouse Hilda won't mind it a quarter as much as I shall,in fact she'll probably rather enjoy the feeling of security.

The kids were downstairs already,having washed and dressed

at lightning speed,as they always do when there's no chance to keep anyone else out of the bathroom.When I got to the breakfast table they were having an argument which went to the tune of'Yes,you did!'No,I didn't!'Yes,you did!'No,I didn't!'and looked like going on for the rest of the morning,until I told them to cheese it.There are only the two of them,Billy,aged seven,and Lorna,aged eleven.It's a peculiar feeling that I have towards the kids.A great deal of the time I can hardly stick the sight of them.As for their conversation,it's just unbearable.They're at that dreary bread-and-buttery age when a kid's mind revolves round things like rulers,pencil-boxes,and who got top marks in French.At other times,especially when they're asleep,I have quite a different feeling.Sometimes I've stood over their cots,on summer evenings when it's light,and watched them sleeping,with their round faces and their tow-coloured hair,several shades lighter than mine,and it's given me that feeling you read about in the Bible when it says your bowels yearn.At such times I feel that I'm just a kind of dried-up seed-pod that doesn't matter two-pence and that my sole importance has been to bring these creatures into the world and feed them while they're growing.But that's only at moments.Most of the time my separate existence looks pretty important to me,I feel that there's life in the old dog yet and plenty of good times ahead,and the notion of myself as a kind of tame dairy-cow for a lot of women and kids to chase up and down doesn't appeal to me.

We didn't talk much at breakfast.Hilda was in her'I don't know what we're going to DO!'mood,partly owing to the price of butter and partly because the Christmas holidays were nearly over and there was still five pounds owing on the school fees for last term.I ate my boiled egg and spread a piece of bread with Golden Crown marmalade.Hilda will persist in buying the stuff.It's fivepence-halfpenny a pound,and the label tells you,in the smallest print the

law allows,that it contains'a certain proportion of neutral fruit-juice'.This started me off,in the rather irritating way I have sometimes,talking about neutral fruit-trees,wondering what they looked like and what countries they grew in,until finally Hilda got angry.It's not that she minds me chipping her,it's only that in some obscure way she thinks it's wicked to make jokes about anything you save money on.

I had a look at the paper,but there wasn't much news.Down in Spain and over in China they were murdering one another as usual,a woman's legs had been found in a railway waiting-room,and King Zog's wedding was wavering in the balance.Finally,at about ten o'clock,rather earlier than I'd intended,I started out for town.The kids had gone off to play in the public gardens.It was a beastly raw morning.As I stepped out of the front door a nasty little gust of wind caught the soapy patch on my neck and made me suddenly feel that my clothes didn't fit and that I was sticky all over.

2

Do you know the road I live in—Ellesmere Road,West Bletchley?Even if you don't,you know fifty others exactly like it.

You know how these streets fester all over the inner-outer suburbs.Always the same.Long,long rows of little semi-detached houses—the numbers in Ellesmere Road run to 212 and ours is 191—as much alike as council houses and generally uglier.The stucco front,the creosoted gate,the privet hedge,the green front door.The Laurels,the Myrtles,the Hawthorns,Mon Abri,Mon Repos,Belle Vue.At perhaps one house in fifty some anti-social type who'll probably end in the workhouse has painted his front door blue instead of green.

That sticky feeling round my neck had put me into a demoralised kind of mood. It's curious how it gets you down to have a sticky neck. It seems to take all the bounce out of you, like when you suddenly discover in a public place that the sole of one of your shoes is coming off. I had no illusions about myself that morning. It was almost as if I could stand at a distance and watch myself coming down the road, with my fat, red face and my false teeth and my vulgar clothes. A chap like me is incapable of looking like a gentleman. Even if you saw me at two hundred yards' distance you'd know immediately—not, perhaps, that I was in the insurance business, but that I was some kind of tout or salesman. The clothes I was wearing were practically the uniform of the tribe. Grey herring-bone suit, a bit the worse for wear, blue overcoat costing fifty shillings, bowler hat, and no gloves. And I've got the look that's peculiar to people who sell things on commission, a kind of coarse brazen look. At my best moments, when I've got a new suit or when I'm smoking a cigar, I might pass for a bookie or a publican, and when things are very bad I might be touting vacuum cleaners, but at ordinary times you'd place me correctly. 'Five to ten quid a week', you'd say as soon as you saw me. Economically and socially I'm about at the average level of Ellesmere Road.

I had the street pretty much to myself. The men had bunked to catch the 8:21 and the women were fiddling with the gas-stoves. When you've time to look about you, and when you happen to be in the right mood, it's a thing that makes you laugh inside to walk down these streets in the inner-outer suburbs and to think of the lives that go on there. Because, after all, what IS a road like Ellesmere Road? Just a prison with the cells all in a row. A line of semi-detached torture-chambers where the poor little five-to-ten-pound-a-weekers quake and shiver, every one of them with the boss twisting his tail and his wife riding him like the nightmare and the

kids sucking his blood like leeches. There's a lot of rot talked about the sufferings of the working class. I'm not so sorry for the proles myself. Did you ever know a navvy who lay awake thinking about the sack? The prole suffers physically, but he's a free man when he isn't working. But in every one of those little stucco boxes there's some poor bastard who's NEVER free except when he's fast asleep and dreaming that he's got the boss down the bottom of a well and is bunging lumps of coal at him.

Of course the basic trouble with people like us, I said to myself, is that we all imagine we've got something to lose. To begin with, nine-tenths of the people in Ellesmere Road are under the impression that they own their houses. Ellesmere Road, and the whole quarter surrounding it, until you get to the High Street, is part of a huge racket called the Hesperides Estate, the property of the Cheerful Credit Building Society. Building societies are probably the cleverest racket of modern times. My own line, insurance, is a swindle I admit, but it's an open swindle with the cards on the table. But the beauty of the building society swindles is that your victims think you're doing them a kindness. You wallop them, and they lick your hand. I sometimes think I'd like to have the Hesperides Estate surmounted by an enormous statue to the god of building societies. It would be a queer sort of god. Among other things it would be bi-sexual. The top half would be a managing director and the bottom half would be a wife in the family way. In one hand it would carry an enormous key—the key of the workhouse, of course—and in the other—what do they call those things like French horns with presents coming out of them?—a cornucopia, out of which would be pouring portable radios, life-insurance policies, false teeth, aspirins, French letters, and concrete garden rollers.

As a matter of fact, in Ellesmere Road we don't own our houses, even when we've finished paying for them. They're not

freehold,only leasehold.They're priced at five-fifty,payable over a period of sixteen years,and they're a class of house which,if you bought them for cash down,would cost round about three-eighty.That represents a profit of a hundred and seventy for the Cheerful Credit,but needless to say the Cheerful Credit makes a lot more out of it than that.Three-eighty includes the builder's profit,but the Cheerful Credit,under the name of Wilson & Bloom,builds the houses itself and scoops the builder's profit.All it has to pay for is the materials.But it also scoops the profit on the materials,because under the name of Brookes & Scatterby it sells itself the bricks,tiles,doors>window-frames,sand,cement and,I think,glass.And it wouldn't altogether surprise me to learn that under yet another alias it sells itself the timber to make the doors and window-frames.Also—and this was something which we really might have foreseen,though it gave us all a knock when we discovered it—the Cheerful Credit doesn't always keep to its end of the bargain.When Ellesmere Road was built it gave on some open fields—nothing very wonderful,but good for the kids to play in—known as Platt's Meadows.There was nothing in black and white,but it had always been understood that Platt's Meadows weren't to be built on.However,West Bletchley was a growing suburb,Rothwell's jam factory had opened in '28 and the Anglo-American All-Steel Bicycle factory started in '33,and the population was increasing and rents were going up.I've never seen Sir Herbert Crum or any other of the big noises of the Cheerful Credit in the flesh,but in my mind's eye I could see their mouths watering.Suddenly the builders arrived and houses began to go up on Platt's Meadows.There was a howl of agony from the Hesperides,and a tenants'defence association was set up.No use! Crum's lawyers had knocked the stuffing out of us in five minutes,and Platt's Meadows were built over.But the really subtle swindle,the one that makes me feel old Crum deserved his

baronetcy, is the mental one. Merely because of the illusion that we own our houses and have what's called 'a stake in the country', we poor saps in the Hesperides, and in all such places, are turned into Crum's devoted slaves for ever. We're all respectable householders—that's to say Tories, yes-men, and bumsuckers. Daren't kill the goose that lays the gilded eggs! And the fact that actually we aren't householders, that we're all in the middle of paying for our houses and eaten up with the ghastly fear that something might happen before we've made the last payment, merely increases the effect. We're all bought, and what's more we're bought with our own money. Every one of those poor downtrodden bastards, sweating his guts out to pay twice the proper price for a brick doll's house that's called Belle Vue because there's no view and the bell doesn't ring—every one of those poor suckers would die on the field of battle to save his country from Bolshevism.

I turned down Walpole Road and got into the High Street. There's a train to London at 10:14. I was just passing the Sixpenny Bazaar when I remembered the mental note I'd made that morning to buy a packet of razor-blades. When I got to the soap counter the floor-manager, or whatever his proper title is, was cursing the girl in charge there. Generally there aren't many people in the Sixpenny at that hour of the morning. Sometimes if you go in just after opening-time you see all the girls lined up in a row and given their morning curse, just to get them into trim for the day. They say these big chain-stores have chaps with special powers of sarcasm and abuse who are sent from branch to branch to ginger the girls up. The floor-manager was an ugly little devil, undersized, with very square shoulders and a spiky grey moustache. He'd just pounced on her about something, some mistake in the change evidently, and was going for her with a voice like a circular saw.

'Ho,no!Course you couldn't count it!COURSE you couldn't.Too much trouble,that'd be.Ho,no!'

Before I could stop myself I'd caught the girl's eye.It wasn't so nice for her to have a fat middle-aged bloke with a red face looking on while she took her cursing.I turned away as quickly as I could and pretended to be interested in some stuff at the next counter,curtain rings or something.He was on to her again.He was one of those people who turn away and then suddenly dart back at you,like a dragon-fly.

'COURSE you couldn't count it!Doesn't matter to YOU if we're two bob out.Doesn't matter at all.What's two bob to YOU?Couldn't ask YOU to go to the trouble of counting it properly.Ho,no!Nothing matters'ere'cept YOUR convenience.You don't think about others,do you?'

This went on for about five minutes in a voice you could hear half across the shop.He kept turning away to make her think he'd finished with her and then darting back to have another go.As I edged a bit farther off I had a glance at them.The girl was a kid about eighteen,rather fat,with a sort of moony face,the kind that would never get the change right anyway.She'd turned pale pink and she was wriggling,actually wriggling with pain.It was just the same as if he'd been cutting into her with a whip.The girls at the other counters were pretending not to hear.He was an ugly,stiff-built little devil,the sort of cock-sparrow type of man that sticks his chest out and puts his hands under his coat-tails—the type that'd be a sergeant-major only they aren't tall enough.Do you notice how often they have under-sized men for these bullying jobs?He was sticking his face,moustache and all,almost into hers so as to scream at her better.And the girl all pink and wriggling.

Finally he decided that he'd said enough and strutted off like an admiral on the quarter-deck, and I came up to the counter for my razor-blades. He knew I'd heard every word, and so did she, and both of them knew I knew they knew. But the worst of it was that for my benefit she'd got to pretend that nothing had happened and put on the standoffish keep-your-distance attitude that a shopgirl's supposed to keep up with male customers. Had to act the grown-up young lady half a minute after I'd seen her cursed like a skivvy! Her face was still pink and her hands were trembling. I asked her for penny blades and she started fumbling in the threepenny tray. Then the little devil of a floor-manager turned our way and for a moment both of us thought he was coming back to begin again. The girl flinched like a dog that sees the whip. But she was looking at me out of the corner of her eye. I could see that because I'd seen her cursed she hated me like the devil. Queer!

I cleared out with my razor-blades. Why do they stand it? I was thinking. Pure funk, of course. One back-answer and you get the sack. It's the same everywhere. I thought of the lad that sometimes serves me at the chain-store grocery we deal at. A great hefty lump of twenty, with cheeks like roses and enormous fore-arms, ought to be working in a blacksmith's shop. And there he is in his white jacket, bent double across the counter, rubbing his hands together with his 'Yes, sir! Very true, sir! Pleasant weather for the time of year, sir! What can I have the pleasure of getting you today, sir?' practically asking you to kick his bum. Orders, of course. The customer is always right. The thing you can see in his face is mortal dread that you might report him for impertinence and get him sacked. Besides, how's he to know you aren't one of the narks the company sends round? Fear! We swim in it. It's our element. Everyone that isn't scared stiff of losing his job is scared stiff of war, or Fascism, or Communism, or something. Jews sweating

when they think of Hitler. It crossed my mind that that little bastard with the spiky moustache was probably a damn sight more scared for his job than the girl was. Probably got a family to support. And perhaps, who knows, at home he's meek and mild, grows cucumbers in the back garden, lets his wife sit on him and the kids pull his moustache. And by the same token you never read about a Spanish Inquisitor or one of these higher-ups in the Russian OGPU without being told that in private life he was such a good kind man, best of husbands and fathers, devoted to his tame canary, and so forth.

The girl at the soap counter was looking after me as I went out of the door. She'd have murdered me if she could. How she hated me because of what I'd seen! Much more than she hated the floor-manager.

3

There was a bombing plane flying low overhead. For a minute or two it seemed to be keeping pace with the train.

Two vulgar kinds of blokes in shabby overcoats, obviously commercials of the lowest type, newspaper canvassers probably, were sitting opposite me. One of them was reading the Mail and the other was reading the Express. I could see by their manner that they'd spotted me for one of their kind. Up at the other end of the carriage two lawyers' clerks with black bags were keeping up a conversation full of legal baloney that was meant to impress the rest of us and show that they didn't belong to the common herd.

I was watching the backs of the houses sliding past. The line from West Bletchley runs most of the way through slums, but it's kind of peaceful, the glimpses you get of little backyards with bits of flowers stuck in boxes and the flat roofs where the women peg out the washing and the bird-cage on the wall. The great black bombing

plane swayed a little in the air and zoomed ahead so that I couldn't see it. I was sitting with my back to the engine. One of the commercials cocked his eye at it for just a second. I knew what he was thinking. For that matter it's what everybody else is thinking. You don't have to be a highbrow to think such thoughts nowadays. In two years' time, one year's time, what shall we be doing when we see one of those things? Making a dive for the cellar, wetting our bags with fright.

The commercial bloke put down his Daily Mail.

'Templegate's winner come in,' he said.

The lawyers' clerks were spouting some learned rot about fee-simple and peppercorns. The other commercial felt in his waistcoat pocket and took out a bent Woodbine. He felt in the other pocket and then leaned across to me.

'Got a match, Tubby?'

I felt for my matches. 'Tubby', you notice. That's interesting, really. For about a couple of minutes I stopped thinking about bombs and began thinking about my figure as I'd studied it in my bath that morning.

It's quite true I'm tubby, in fact my upper half is almost exactly the shape of a tub. But what's interesting, I think, is that merely because you happen to be a little bit fat, almost anyone, even a total stranger, will take it for granted to give you a nickname that's an insulting comment on your personal appearance. Suppose a chap was a hunchback or had a squint or a hare-lip—would you give him a nickname to remind him of it? But every fat man's labelled as a matter of course. I'm the type that people automatically slap on the back and punch in the ribs, and nearly all of them think I like it. I

never go into the saloon bar of the Crown at Pudley(I pass that way once a week on business)without that ass Waters,who travels for the Seafoam Soap people but who's more or less a permanency in the saloon bar of the Crown,prodding me in the ribs and singing out'Here a sheer hulk lies poor Tom Bowling!'which is a joke the bloody fools in the bar never get tired of.Waters has got a finger like a bar of iron.They all think a fat man doesn't have any feelings.

The commercial took another of my matches,to pick his teeth with,and chucked the box back.The train whizzed on to an iron bridge.Down below I got a glimpse of a baker's van and a long string of lorries loaded with cement.The queer thing,I was thinking,is that in a way they're right about fat men.It's a fact that a fat man,particularly a man who's been fat from birth—from childhood,that's to say—isn't quite like other men.He goes through his life on a different plane,a sort of light-comedy plane,though in the case of blokes in side-shows at fairs,or in fact anyone over twenty stone,it isn't so much light comedy as low farce.I've been both fat and thin in my life,and I know the difference fatness makes to your outlook.It kind of prevents you from taking things too hard.I doubt whether a man who's never been anything but fat,a man who's been called Fatty ever since he could walk,even knows of the existence of any really deep emotions.How could he?He's got no experience of such things.He can't ever be present at a tragic scene,because a scene where there's a fat man present isn't tragic,it's comic.Just imagine a fat Hamlet,for instance!Or Oliver Hardy acting Romeo.Funnily enough I'd been thinking something of the kind only a few days earlier when I was reading a novel I'd got out of Boots.Wasted Passion,it was called.The chap in the story finds out that his girl has gone off with another chap.He's one of these chaps you read about in novels,that have pale sensitive faces and dark hair and a private income.I remember more or less how the passage

went:

David paced up and down the room,his hands pressed to his forehead.The news seemed to have stunned him.For a long time he could not believe it.Sheila untrue to him!It could not be!Suddenly realisation rushed over him,and he saw the fact in all its stark horror.It was too much.He flung himself down in a paroxysm of weeping.

Anyway,it went something like that.And even at the time it started me thinking.There you have it,you see.That's how people—some people—are expected to behave.But how about a chap like me?Suppose Hilda went off for a week-end with somebody else—not that I'd care a damn,in fact it would rather please me to find that she'd still got that much kick left in her—but suppose I did care,would I fling myself down in a paroxysm of weeping?Would anyone expect me to?You couldn't,with a figure like mine.It would be downright obscene.

The train was running along an embankment.A little below us you could see the roofs of the houses stretching on and on,the little red roofs where the bombs are going to drop,a bit lighted up at this moment because a ray of sunshine was catching them.Funny how we keep on thinking about bombs.Of course there's no question that it's coming soon.You can tell how close it is by the cheer-up stuff they're talking about in the newspaper.I was reading a piece in the News Chronicle the other day where it said that bombing planes can't do any damage nowadays.The anti-aircraft guns have got so good that the bomber has to stay at twenty thousand feet.The chap thinks,you notice,that if an aeroplane's high enough the bombs don't reach the ground.Or more likely what he really meant was that they'll miss Woolwich Arsenal and only hit places like Ellesmere Road.

But taking it by and large,I thought,it's not so bad to be fat.One thing about a fat man is that he's always popular.There's really no kind of company,from bookies to bishops,where a fat man doesn't fit in and feel at home.As for women,fat men have more luck with them than people seem to think.It's all bunk to imagine,as some people do,that a woman looks on a fat man as just a joke.The truth is that a woman doesn't look on ANY man as a joke if he can kid her that he's in love with her.

Mind you,I haven't always been fat.I've been fat for eight or nine years,and I suppose I've developed most of the characteristics.But it's also a fact that internally,mentally,I'm not altogether fat.No!Don't mistake me.I'm not trying to put myself over as a kind of tender flower,the aching heart behind the smiling face and so forth.You couldn't get on in the insurance business if you were anything like that.I'm vulgar,I'm insensitive,and I fit in with my environment.So long as anywhere in the world things are being sold on commission and livings are picked up by sheer brass and lack of finer feelings,chaps like me will be doing it.In almost all circumstances I'd manage to make a living—always a living and never a fortune—and even in war,revolution,plague,and famine I'd back myself to stay alive longer than most people.I'm that type.But also I've got something else inside me,chiefly a hangover from the past.I'll tell you about that later.I'm fat,but I'm thin inside.Has it ever struck you that there's a thin man inside every fat man,just as they say there's a statue inside every block of stone?

The chap who'd borrowed my matches was having a good pick at his teeth over the Express.

'Legs case don't seem to get much forrader,'he said.

'They'll never get'im,'said the other."Ow could you identify a

pair of legs?They're all the bleeding same,aren't they?'

'Might trace'im through the piece of paper'e wrapped'em up in,'said the first.

Down below you could see the roofs of the houses stretching on and on,twisting this way and that with the streets,but stretching on and on,like an enormous plain that you could have ridden over.Whichever way you cross London it's twenty miles of houses almost without a break.Christ!how can the bombers miss us when they come?We're just one great big bull's-eye.And no warning,probably.Because who's going to be such a bloody fool as to declare war nowadays?If I was Hitler I'd send my bombers across in the middle of a disarmament conference.Some quiet morning,when the clerks are streaming across London Bridge,and the canary's singing,and the old woman's pegging the bloomers on the line—zoom,whizz,plonk!Houses going up into the air,bloomers soaked with blood,canary singing on above the corpses.

Seems a pity somehow,I thought.I looked at the great sea of roofs stretching on and on.Miles and miles of streets,fried-fish shops,tin chapels,picture houses,little printing-shops up back alleys,factories,blocks of flats,whelk stalls,dairies,power stations—on and on and on.Enormous!And the peacefulness of it!Like a great wilderness with no wild beasts.No guns firing,nobody chucking pineapples,nobody beating anybody else up with a rubber truncheon.If you come to think of it,in the whole of England at this moment there probably isn't a single bedroom window from which anyone's firing a machine-gun.

But how about five years from now?Or two years?Or one year?

I'd dropped my papers at the office. Warner is one of these cheap American dentists, and he has his consulting-room, or 'parlour' as he likes to call it, half-way up a big block of offices, between a photographer and a rubber-goods wholesaler. I was early for my appointment, but it was time for a bit of grub. I don't know what put it into my head to go into a milk-bar. They're places I generally avoid. We five-to-ten-pound-a-weekers aren't well served in the way of eating-places in London. If your idea of the amount to spend on a meal is one and threepence, it's either Lyons, the Express Dairy, or the A.B.C., or else it's the kind of funeral snack they serve you in the saloon bar, a pint of bitter and a slab of cold pie, so cold that it's colder than the beer. Outside the milk-bar the boys were yelling the first editions of the evening papers.

Behind the bright red counter a girl in a tall white cap was fiddling with an ice-box, and somewhere at the back a radio was playing, plonk-tiddle-tiddle-plonk, a kind of tinny sound. Why the hell am I coming here? I thought to myself as I went in. There's a kind of atmosphere about these places that gets me down. Everything slick and shiny and streamlined; mirrors, enamel and chromium plate whichever direction you look in. Everything spent on the decorations and nothing on the food. No real food at all. Just lists of stuff with American names, sort of phantom stuff that you can't taste and can hardly believe in the existence of. Everything comes out of a carton or a tin, or it's hauled out of a refrigerator or squirted out of a tap or squeezed out of a tube. No comfort, no privacy. Tall stools to sit on, a kind of narrow ledge to eat off, mirrors all round you. A sort of propaganda floating round, mixed up with the noise of the radio, to the effect that food doesn't matter, comfort doesn't matter, nothing matters except slickness and shininess and streamlining. Everything's streamlined nowadays, even the bullet Hitler's keeping for you. I ordered a large coffee and a couple of

frankfurters. The girl in the white cap jerked them at me with about as much interest as you'd throw ants' eggs to a goldfish.

Outside the door a newsboy yelled 'Starnooosstan NERD!' I saw the poster flapping against his knees: LEGS. FRESH DISCOVERIES. Just 'legs,' you notice. It had got down to that. Two days earlier they'd found a woman's legs in a railway waiting-room, done up in a brown-paper parcel, and what with successive editions of the papers, the whole nation was supposed to be so passionately interested in these blasted legs that they didn't need any further introduction. They were the only legs that were news at the moment. It's queer, I thought, as I ate a bit of roll, how dull the murders are getting nowadays. All this cutting people up and leaving bits of them about the countryside. Not a patch on the old domestic poisoning dramas, Crippen, Seddon, Mrs. Maybrick; the truth being, I suppose, that you can't do a good murder unless you believe you're going to roast in hell for it.

At this moment I bit into one of my frankfurters, and—Christ!

I can't honestly say that I'd expected the thing to have a pleasant taste. I'd expected it to taste of nothing, like the roll. But this—well, it was quite an experience. Let me try and describe it to you.

The frankfurter had a rubber skin, of course, and my temporary teeth weren't much of a fit. I had to do a kind of sawing movement before I could get my teeth through the skin. And then suddenly—pop! The thing burst in my mouth like a rotten pear. A sort of horrible soft stuff was oozing all over my tongue. But the taste! For a moment I just couldn't believe it. Then I rolled my tongue round it again and had another try. It was FISH! A sausage, a thing calling itself a frankfurter, filled with fish! I got up and walked straight out without touching my coffee. God knows what that might have tasted

of.

Outside the newsboy shoved the Standard into my face and yelled, 'Legs! Orrible revelations! All the winners! Legs! Legs!' I was still rolling the stuff round my tongue, wondering where I could spit it out. I remembered a bit I'd read in the paper somewhere about these food-factories in Germany where everything's made out of something else. Ersatz, they call it. I remembered reading that THEY were making sausages out of fish, and fish, no doubt, out of something different. It gave me the feeling that I'd bitten into the modern world and discovered what it was really made of. That's the way we're going nowadays. Everything slick and streamlined, everything made out of something else. Celluloid, rubber, chromium-steel everywhere, arc-lamps blazing all night, glass roofs over your head, radios all playing the same tune, no vegetation left, everything cemented over, mock-turtles grazing under the neutral fruit-trees. But when you come down to brass tacks and get your teeth into something solid, a sausage for instance, that's what you get. Rotten fish in a rubber skin. Bombs of filth bursting inside your mouth.

When I'd got the new teeth in I felt a lot better. They sat nice and smooth over the gums, and though very likely it sounds absurd to say that false teeth can make you feel younger, it's a fact that they did so. I tried a smile at myself in a shop window. They weren't half bad. Warner, though cheap, is a bit of an artist and doesn't aim at making you look like a toothpaste advert. He's got huge cabinets full of false teeth—he showed them to me once—all graded according to size and colour, and he picks them out like a jeweller choosing stones for a necklace. Nine people out of ten would have taken my teeth for natural.

I caught a full-length glimpse of myself in another window I

was passing, and it struck me that really I wasn't such a bad figure of a man. A bit on the fat side, admittedly, but nothing offensive, only what the tailors call a 'full figure', and some women like a man to have a red face. There's life in the old dog yet, I thought. I remembered my seventeen quid, and definitely made up my mind that I'd spend it on a woman. There was time to have a pint before the pubs shut, just to baptise the teeth, and feeling rich because of my seventeen quid I stopped at a tobacconist's and bought myself a sixpenny cigar of a kind I'm rather partial to. They're eight inches long and guaranteed pure Havana leaf all through. I suppose cabbages grow in Havana the same as anywhere else.

When I came out of the pub I felt quite different.

I'd had a couple of pints, they'd warmed me up inside, and the cigar smoke oozing round my new teeth gave me a fresh, clean, peaceful sort of feeling. All of a sudden I felt kind of thoughtful and philosophic. It was partly because I didn't have any work to do. My mind went back to the thoughts of war I'd been having earlier that morning, when the bomber flew over the train. I felt in a kind of prophetic mood, the mood in which you foresee the end of the world and get a certain kick out of it.

I was walking westward up the Strand, and though it was coldish I went slowly to get the pleasure of my cigar. The usual crowd that you can hardly fight your way through was streaming up the pavement, all of them with that insane fixed expression on their faces that people have in London streets, and there was the usual jam of traffic with the great red buses nosing their way between the cars, and the engines roaring and horns tooting. Enough noise to waken the dead, but not to waken this lot, I thought. I felt as if I was the only person awake in a city of sleep-walkers. That's an illusion, of course. When you walk through a crowd of strangers it's

next door to impossible not to imagine that they're all waxworks, but probably they're thinking just the same about you. And this kind of prophetic feeling that keeps coming over me nowadays, the feeling that war's just round the corner and that war's the end of all things, isn't peculiar to me. We've all got it, more or less. I suppose even among the people passing at that moment there must have been chaps who were seeing mental pictures of the shellbursts and the mud. Whatever thought you think there's always a million people thinking it at the same moment. But that was how I felt. We're all on the burning deck and nobody knows it except me. I looked at the dumb-bell faces streaming past. Like turkeys in November, I thought. Not a notion of what's coming to them. It was as if I'd got X-rays in my eyes and could see the skeletons walking.

I looked forward a few years. I saw this street as it'll be in five years' time, say, or three years' time (1941 they say it's booked for), after the fighting's started.

No, not all smashed to pieces. Only a little altered, kind of chipped and dirty-looking, the shop-windows almost empty and so dusty that you can't see into them. Down a side street there's an enormous bomb-crater and a block of buildings burnt out so that it looks like a hollow tooth. Thermite. It's all curiously quiet, and everyone's very thin. A platoon of soldiers comes marching up the street. They're all as thin as rakes and their boots are dragging. The sergeant's got corkscrew moustaches and holds himself like a ramrod, but he's thin too and he's got a cough that almost tears him open. Between his coughs he's trying to bawl at them in the old parade-ground style. 'Nah then, Jones! Lift yer'ed up! What yer keep starin' at the ground for? All them fag-ends was picked up years ago.' suddenly a fit of coughing catches him. He tries to stop it, can't, doubles up like a ruler, and almost coughs his guts out. His face turns pink and purple, his moustache goes limp, and the water

runs out of his eyes.

I can hear the air-raid sirens blowing and the loudspeakers bellowing that our glorious troops have taken a hundred thousand prisoners. I see a top-floor-back in Birmingham and a child of five howling and howling for a bit of bread. And suddenly the mother can't stand it any longer, and she yells at it, 'Shut your trap, you little bastard!' and then she ups the child's frock and smacks its bottom hard, because there isn't any bread and isn't going to be any bread. I see it all. I see the posters and the food-queues, and the castor oil and the rubber truncheons and the machine-guns squirting out of bedroom windows.

Is it going to happen? No knowing. Some days it's impossible to believe it. Some days I say to myself that it's just a scare got up by the newspapers. Some days I know in my bones there's no escaping it.

When I got down near Charing Cross the boys were yelling a later edition of the evening papers. There was some more drivel about the murder. LEGS. FAMOUS SURGEON'S STATEMENT. Then another poster caught my eye: KING ZOG'S WEDDING POSTPONED. King Zog! What a name! It's next door to impossible to believe a chap with a name like that isn't a jet-black cannibal.

But just at that moment a queer thing happened. King Zog's name—but I suppose, as I'd already seen the name several times that day, it was mixed up with some sound in the traffic or the smell of horse-dung or something—had started memories in me.

The past is a curious thing. It's with you all the time. I suppose an hour never passes without your thinking of things that happened ten or twenty years ago, and yet most of the time it's got no reality, it's just a set of facts that you've learned, like a lot of stuff in

a history book. Then some chance sight or sound or smell, especially smell, sets you going, and the past doesn't merely come back to you, you're actually IN the past. It was like that at this moment.

I was back in the parish church at Lower Binfield, and it was thirty-eight years ago. To outward appearances, I suppose, I was still walking down the Strand, fat and forty-five, with false teeth and a bowler hat, but inside me I was Georgie Bowling, aged seven, younger son of Samuel Bowling, corn and seed merchant, of 57 High Street, Lower Binfield. And it was Sunday morning, and I could smell the church. How I could smell it! You know the smell churches have, a peculiar, dank, dusty, decaying, sweetish sort of smell. There's a touch of candle-grease in it, and perhaps a whiff of incense and a suspicion of mice, and on Sunday mornings it's a bit overlaid by yellow soap and serge dresses, but predominantly it's that sweet, dusty, musty smell that's like the smell of death and life mixed up together. It's powdered corpses, really.

In those days I was about four feet high. I was standing on the hassock so as to see over the pew in front, and I could feel Mother's black serge dress under my hand. I could also feel my stockings pulled up over my knees—we used to wear them like that then—and the saw edge of the Eton collar they used to buckle me into on Sunday mornings. And I could hear the organ wheezing and two enormous voices bellowing out the psalm. In our church there were two men who led the singing, in fact they did so much of the singing that nobody else got much of a chance. One was Shooter, the fishmonger, and the other was old Wetherall, the joiner and undertaker. They used to sit opposite one another on either side of the nave, in the pews nearest the pulpit. Shooter was a short fat man with a very pink, smooth face, a big nose, drooping moustache, and a chin that kind of fell away beneath his mouth. Wetherall was quite different. He was a great, gaunt, powerful old devil of about

sixty, with a face like a death's-head and stiff grey hair half an inch long all over his head. I've never seen a living man who looked so exactly like a skeleton. You could see every line of the skull in his face, his skin was like parchment, and his great lantern jaw full of yellow teeth worked up and down just like the jaw of a skeleton in an anatomical museum. And yet with all his leanness he looked as strong as iron, as though he'd live to be a hundred and make coffins for everyone in that church before he'd finished. Their voices were quite different, too. Shooter had a kind of desperate, agonised bellow, as though someone had a knife at his throat and he was just letting out his last yell for help. But Wetherall had a tremendous, churning, rumbling noise that happened deep down inside him, like enormous barrels being rolled to and fro underground. However much noise he let out, you always knew he'd got plenty more in reserve. The kids nicknamed him Rumbletummy.

They used to get up a kind of antiphonal effect, especially in the psalms. It was always Wetherall who had the last word. I suppose really they were friends in private life, but in my kid's way I used to imagine that they were deadly enemies and trying to shout one another down. Shooter would roar out 'The Lord is my shepherd', and then Wetherall would come in with 'Therefore can I lack nothing', drowning him completely. You always knew which of the two was master. I used especially to look forward to that psalm that has the bit about Sihon king of the Amorites and Og the king of Bashan (this was what King Zog's name had reminded me of). Shooter would start off with 'Sihon king of the Amorites', then perhaps for half a second you could hear the rest of the congregation singing the 'and', and then Wetherall's enormous bass would come in like a tidal wave and swallow everybody up with 'Og the king of Bashan'. I wish I could make you hear the tremendous, rumbling, subterranean barrel-noise that he could get

into that word'Og'.He even used to clip off the end of the'and',so that when I was a very small kid I used to think it was Dog the king of Bashan.But later,when I got the names right,I formed a picture in my mind's eye of Sihon and Og.I saw them as a couple of those great Egyptian statues that I'd seen pictures of in the penny encyclopedia,enormous stone statues thirty feet high,sitting on their thrones opposite one another,with their hands on their knees and a faint mysterious smile on their faces.

How it came back to me!That peculiar feeling—it was only a feeling,you couldn't describe it as an activity—that we used to call'Church'.The sweet corpsy smell,the rustle of Sunday dresses,the wheeze of the organ and the roaring voices,the spot of light from the hole in the window creeping slowly up the nave.In some way the grown-ups could put it across that this extraordinary performance was necessary.You took it for granted,just as you took the Bible,which you got in big doses in those days.There were texts on every wall and you knew whole chapters of the O.T.by heart.Even now my head's stuffed full of bits out of the Bible.And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord.And Asher abode in his breeches.Followed them from Dan until thou come unto Beersheba.Smote him under the fifth rib,so that he died.You never understood it,you didn't try to or want to,it was just a kind of medicine,a queer-tasting stuff that you had to swallow and knew to be in some way necessary.An extraordinary rigmarole about people with names like Shimei and Nebuchadnezzar and Ahithophel and Hashbadada ; people with long stiff garments and Assyrian beards,riding up and down on camels among temples and cedar trees and doing extraordinary things.Sacrificing burnt offerings,walking about in fiery furnaces,getting nailed on crosses,getting swallowed by whales.And all mixed up with the sweet graveyard smell and the serge dresses and the wheeze of the

organ.

That was the world I went back to when I saw the poster about King Zog. For a moment I didn't merely remember it, I was IN it. Of course such impressions don't last more than a few seconds. A moment later it was as though I'd opened my eyes again, and I was forty-five and there was a traffic jam in the Strand. But it had left a kind of after-effect behind. Sometimes when you come out of a train of thought you feel as if you were coming up from deep water, but this time it was the other way about, it was as though it was back in 1900 that I'd been breathing real air. Even now, with my eyes open, so to speak, all those bloody fools hustling to and fro, and the posters and the petrol-stink and the roar of the engines, seemed to me less real than Sunday morning in Lower Binfield thirty-eight years ago.

I chucked away my cigar and walked on slowly. I could smell the corpse-smell. In a manner of speaking I can smell it now. I'm back in Lower Binfield, and the year's 1900. Beside the horse-trough in the market-place the carrier's horse is having its nose-bag. At the sweet-shop on the corner Mother Wheeler is weighing out a ha'porth of brandy balls. Lady Rampling's carriage is driving by, with the tiger sitting behind in his pipeclayed breeches with his arms folded. Uncle Ezekiel is cursing Joe Chamberlain. The recruiting-sergeant in his scarlet jacket, tight blue overalls, and pillbox hat, is strutting up and down twisting his moustache. The drunks are puking in the yard behind the George. Vicky's at Windsor, God's in heaven, Christ's on the cross, Jonah's in the whale, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are in the fiery furnace, and Sihon king of the Amorites and Og the king of Bashan are sitting on their thrones looking at one another—not doing anything exactly, just existing, keeping their appointed place, like a couple of fire-dogs, or the Lion and the Unicorn.

Is it gone for ever?I'm not certain.But I tell you it was a good world to live in.I belong to it.So do you.

Part II

1

The world I momentarily remembered when I saw King Zog's name on the poster was so different from the world I live in now that you might have a bit of difficulty in believing I ever belonged to it.

I suppose by this time you've got a kind of picture of me in your mind—a fat middle-aged bloke with false teeth and a red face—and subconsciously you've been imagining that I was just the same even when I was in my cradle. But forty-five years is a long time, and though some people don't change and develop, others do. I've changed a great deal, and I've had my ups and downs, mostly ups. It may seem queer, but my father would probably be rather proud of me if he could see me now. He'd think it a wonderful thing that a son of his should own a motor-car and live in a house with a bathroom. Even now I'm a little above my origin, and at other times I've touched levels that we should never have dreamed of in those old days before the war.

Before the war! How long shall we go on saying that, I wonder? How long before the answer will be 'Which war?' In my case the never-never land that people are thinking of when they say 'before the war' might almost be before the Boer War. I was born in '93, and I can actually remember the outbreak of the Boer War, because of the first-class row that Father and Uncle Ezekiel had about it. I've several other memories that would date from about a year earlier than that.

The very first thing I remember is the smell of sainfoin chaff. You went up the stone passage that led from the kitchen to the shop, and the smell of sainfoin got stronger all the way. Mother had fixed a wooden gate in the doorway to prevent Joe and myself (Joe was my elder brother) from getting into the shop. I can still remember standing there clutching the bars, and the smell of sainfoin mixed up with the damp plaster smell that belonged to the passage. It wasn't till years later that I somehow managed to crash the gate and get into the shop when nobody was there. A mouse that had been having a go at one of the meal-bins suddenly plopped out and ran between my feet. It was quite white with meal. This must have happened when I was about six.

When you're very young you seem to suddenly become conscious of things that have been under your nose for a long time past. The things round about you swim into your mind one at a time, rather as they do when you're waking from sleep. For instance, it was only when I was nearly four that I suddenly realised that we owned a dog. Nailer, his name was, an old white English terrier of the breed that's gone out nowadays. I met him under the kitchen table and in some way seemed to grasp, having only learnt it that moment, that he belonged to us and that his name was Nailer. In the same way, a bit earlier, I'd discovered that beyond the gate at the end of the passage there was a place where the smell of sainfoin came from. And the shop itself, with the huge scales and the wooden measures and the tin shovel, and the white lettering on the window, and the bullfinch in its cage—which you couldn't see very well even from the pavement, because the window was always dusty—all these things dropped into place in my mind one by one, like bits of a jig-saw puzzle.

Time goes on, you get stronger on your legs, and by degrees you begin to get a grasp of geography. I suppose Lower Binfield was just

like any other market town of about two thousand inhabitants. It was in Oxfordshire—I keep saying WAS, you notice, though after all the place still exists—about five miles from the Thames. It lay in a bit of a valley, with a low ripple of hills between itself and the Thames, and higher hills behind. On top of the hills there were woods in sort of dim blue masses among which you could see a great white house with a colonnade. This was Binfield House ('The Hall', everybody called it), and the top of the hill was known as Upper Binfield, though there was no village there and hadn't been for a hundred years or more. I must have been nearly seven before I noticed the existence of Binfield House. When you're very small you don't look into the distance. But by that time I knew every inch of the town, which was shaped roughly like a cross with the market-place in the middle. Our shop was in the High Street a little before you got to the market-place, and on the corner there was Mrs. Wheeler's sweet-shop where you spent a halfpenny when you had one. Mother Wheeler was a dirty old witch and people suspected her of sucking the bull's-eyes and putting them back in the bottle, though this was never proved. Farther down there was the barber's shop with the advert for Abdulla cigarettes—the one with the Egyptian soldiers on it, and curiously enough they're using the same advert to this day—and the rich boozy smell of bay rum and latakia. Behind the houses you could see the chimneys of the brewery. In the middle of the market-place there was the stone horse-trough, and on top of the water there was always a fine film of dust and chaff.

Before the war, and especially before the Boer War, it was summer all the year round. I'm quite aware that that's a delusion. I'm merely trying to tell you how things come back to me. If I shut my eyes and think of Lower Binfield any time before I was, say, eight, it's always in summer weather that I remember it. Either it's the market-

place at dinner-time, with a sort of sleepy dusty hush over everything and the carrier's horse with his nose dug well into his nose-bag, munching away, or it's a hot afternoon in the great green juicy meadows round the town, or it's about dusk in the lane behind the allotments, and there's a smell of pipe-tobacco and night-stocks floating through the hedge. But in a sense I do remember different seasons, because all my memories are bound up with things to eat, which varied at different times of the year. Especially the things you used to find in the hedges. In July there were dewberries—but they're very rare—and the blackberries were getting red enough to eat. In September there were sloes and hazel-nuts. The best hazelnuts were always out of reach. Later on there were beech-nuts and crab-apples. Then there were the kind of minor foods that you used to eat when there was nothing better going. Haws—but they're not much good—and hips, which have a nice sharp taste if you clean the hairs out of them. Angelica is good in early summer, especially when you're thirsty, and so are the stems of various grasses. Then there's sorrel, which is good with bread and butter, and pig-nuts, and a kind of wood shamrock which has a sour taste. Even plantain seeds are better than nothing when you're a long way from home and very hungry.

Joe was two years older than myself. When we were very small Mother used to pay Katie Simmons eighteen pence a week to take us out for walks in the afternoons. Katie's father worked in the brewery and had fourteen children, so that the family were always on the lookout for odd jobs. She was only twelve when Joe was seven and I was five, and her mental level wasn't very different from ours. She used to drag me by the arm and call me 'Baby', and she had just enough authority over us to prevent us from being run over by dogcarts or chased by bulls, but so far as conversation went we were almost on equal terms. We used to go for long, trailing kind of walks

—always, of course, picking and eating things all the way—down the lane past the allotments, across Roper's Meadows, and down to the Mill Farm, where there was a pool with newts and tiny carp in it (Joe and I used to go fishing there when we were a bit older), and back by the Upper Binfield Road so as to pass the sweet-shop that stood on the edge of the town. This shop was in such a bad position that anyone who took it went bankrupt, and to my own knowledge it was three times a sweet-shop, once a grocer's, and once a bicycle-repair shop, but it had a peculiar fascination for children. Even when we had no money, we'd go that way so as to glue our noses against the window. Katie wasn't in the least above sharing a farthing's worth of sweets and quarrelling over her share. You could buy things worth having for a farthing in those days. Most sweets were four ounces a penny, and there was even some stuff called Paradise Mixture, mostly broken sweets from other bottles, which was six. Then there were Farthing Everlastings, which were a yard long and couldn't be finished inside half an hour. Sugar mice and sugar pigs were eight a penny, and so were liquorice pistols, popcorn was a halfpenny for a large bag, and a prize packet which contained several different kinds of sweets, a gold ring, and sometimes a whistle, was a penny. You don't see prize packets nowadays. A whole lot of the kinds of sweets we had in those days have gone out. There was a kind of flat white sweet with mottoes printed on them, and also a kind of sticky pink stuff in an oval matchwood box with a tiny tin spoon to eat it with, which cost a halfpenny. Both of those have disappeared. So have Caraway Comfits, and so have chocolate pipes and sugar matches, and even Hundreds and Thousands you hardly ever see. Hundreds and Thousands were a great standby when you'd only a farthing. And what about Penny Monsters? Does one ever see a Penny Monster nowadays? It was a huge bottle, holding more than a quart of fizzy lemonade, all for a penny. That's another thing that the war killed stone dead.

It always seems to be summer when I look back.I can feel the grass round me as tall as myself,and the heat coming out of the earth.And the dust in the lane,and the warm greeny light coming through the hazel boughs.I can see the three of us trailing along,eating stuff out of the hedge,with Katie dragging at my arm and saying'Come on,Baby!'and sometimes yelling ahead to Joe,'Joe! You come back'ere this minute!You'll catch it!'Joe was a hefty boy with a big,lumpy sort of head and tremendous calves,the kind of boy who's always doing something dangerous.At seven he'd already got into short trousers,with the thick black stockings drawn up over the knee and the great clumping boots that boys had to wear in those days.I was still in frocks—a kind of holland overall that Mother used to make for me.Katie used to wear a dreadful ragged parody of a grown-up dress that descended from sister to sister in her family.She had a ridiculous great hat with her pigtails hanging down behind it,and a long,draggled skirt which trailed on the ground,and button boots with the heels trodden down.She was a tiny thing,not much taller than Joe,but not bad at'minding'children.In a family like that a child is'minding'other children about as soon as it's weaned.At times she'd try to be grown-up and ladylike,and she had a way of cutting you short with a proverb,which to her mind was something unanswerable.If you said'Don't care',she'd answer immediately:

Don't care was made to care,

Don't care was hung,

Don't care was put in a pot

And boiled till he was done.

Or if you called her names it would be'Hard words break no bones',or,when you'd been boasting,'Pride comes before a fall'.This

came very true one day when I was strutting along pretending to be a soldier and fell into a cowpat. Her family lived in a filthy little rat-hole of a place in the slummy street behind the brewery. The place swarmed with children like a kind of vermin. The whole family had managed to dodge going to school, which was fairly easy to do in those days, and started running errands and doing other odd jobs as soon as they could walk. One of her elder brothers got a month for stealing turnips. She stopped taking us out for walks a year later when Joe was eight and getting too tough for a girl to handle. He'd discovered that in Katie's home they slept five in a bed, and used to tease the life out of her about it.

Poor Katie! She had her first baby when she was fifteen. No one knew who was the father, and probably Katie wasn't too certain herself. Most people believe it was one of her brothers. The workhouse people took the baby, and Katie went into service in Walton. Some time afterwards she married a tinker, which even by the standards of her family was a come-down. The last time I saw her was in 1913. I was biking through Walton, and I passed some dreadful wooden shacks beside the railway line, with fences round them made out of barrel-staves, where the gypsies used to camp at certain times of the year, when the police would let them. A wrinkled-up hag of a woman, with her hair coming down and a smoky face, looking at least fifty years old, came out of one of the huts and began shaking out a rag mat. It was Katie, who must have been twenty-seven.

2

Thursday was market day. Chaps with round red faces like pumpkins and dirty smocks and huge boots covered with dry cow-dung, carrying long hazel switches, used to drive their brutes into the market-place early in the morning. For hours there'd be a terrific

hullabaloo:dogs barking,pigs squealing,chaps in tradesmen's vans who wanted to get through the crush cracking their whips and cursing,and everyone who had anything to do with the cattle shouting and throwing sticks.The big noise was always when they brought a bull to market.Even at that age it struck me that most of the bulls were harmless law-abiding brutes that only wanted to get to their stalls in peace,but a bull wouldn't have been regarded as a bull if half the town hadn't had to turn out and chase it.Sometimes some terrified brute,generally a half-grown heifer,used to break loose and charge down a side street,and then anyone who happened to be in the way would stand in the middle of the road and swing his arms backwards like the sails of a windmill,shouting,'Woo! Woo!'This was supposed to have a kind of hypnotic effect on an animal and certainly it did frighten them.

Half-way through the morning some of the farmers would come into the shop and run samples of seed through their fingers.Actually Father did very little business with the farmers,because he had no delivery van and couldn't afford to give long credits.Mostly he did a rather petty class of business,poultry food and fodder for the tradesmen's horses and so forth.Old Brewer,of the Mill Farm,who was a stingy old bastard with a grey chin-beard,used to stand there for half an hour,fingering samples of chicken corn and letting them drop into his pocket in an absent-minded manner,after which,of course,he finally used to make off without buying anything.In the evenings the pubs were full of drunken men.In those days beer cost twopence a pint,and unlike the beer nowadays it had some guts in it.All through the Boer War the recruiting sergeant used to be in the four-ale bar of the George every Thursday and Saturday night,dressed up to the nines and very free with his money.Sometimes next morning you'd see him leading off some great sheepish,red-faced lump of a farm lad who'd taken the shilling

when he was too drunk to see and found in the morning that it would cost him twenty pounds to get out of it. People used to stand in their doorways and shake their heads when they saw them go past, almost as if it had been a funeral. 'Well now! Listed for a soldier! Just think of it! A fine young fellow like that!' It just shocked them. Listing for a soldier, in their eyes, was the exact equivalent of a girl's going on the streets. Their attitude to the war, and to the Army, was very curious. They had the good old English notions that the red-coats are the scum of the earth and anyone who joins the Army will die of drink and go straight to hell, but at the same time they were good patriots, stuck Union Jacks in their windows, and held it as an article of faith that the English had never been beaten in battle and never could be. At that time everyone, even the Nonconformists, used to sing sentimental songs about the thin red line and the soldier boy who died on the battlefield far away. These soldier boys always used to die when the shot and shell were flying, I remember. It puzzled me as a kid. Shot I could understand, but it produced a queer picture in my mind to think of cockle-shells flying through the air. When Mafeking was relieved the people nearly yelled the roof off, and there were at any rate times when they believed the tales about the Boers chucking babies into the air and skewering them on their bayonets. Old Brewer got so fed up with the kids yelling 'Krooger!' after him that towards the end of the war he shaved his beard off. The people's attitude towards the Government was really the same. They were all true-blue Englishmen and swore that Vicky was the best queen that ever lived and foreigners were dirt, but at the same time nobody ever thought of paying a tax, not even a dog-licence, if there was any way of dodging it.

Before and after the war Lower Binfield was a Liberal constituency. During the war there was a by-election which the

Conservatives won.I was too young to grasp what it was all about,I only knew that I was a Conservative because I liked the blue streamers better than the red ones,and I chiefly remember it because of a drunken man who fell on his nose on the pavement outside the George.In the general excitement nobody took any notice of him,and he lay there for hours in the hot sun with his blood drying round him,and when it dried it was purple.By the time the 1906 election came along I was old enough to understand it,more or less,and this time I was a Liberal because everybody else was.The people chased the Conservative candidate half a mile and threw him into a pond full of duckweed.People took politics seriously in those days.They used to begin storing up rotten eggs weeks before an election.

Very early in life,when the Boer War broke out,I remember the big row between Father and Uncle Ezekiel.Uncle Ezekiel had a little boot-shop in one of the streets off the High Street,and also did some cobbling.It was a small business and tended to get smaller,which didn't matter greatly because Uncle Ezekiel wasn't married.He was only a half-brother and much older than Father,twenty years older at least,and for the fifteen years or so that I knew him he always looked exactly the same.He was a fine-looking old chap,rather tall,with white hair and the whitest whiskers I ever saw—white as thistledown.He had a way of slapping his leather apron and standing up very straight—a reaction from bending over the last,I suppose—after which he'd bark his opinions straight in your face,ending up with a sort of ghostly cackle.He was a real old nineteenth-century Liberal,the kind that not only used to ask you what Gladstone said in '78 but could tell you the answer,and one of the very few people in Lower Binfield who stuck to the same opinions all through the war.He was always denouncing Joe Chamberlain and some gang of people that he referred to as the

Park Lane riff-raff'.I can hear him now, having one of his arguments with Father.'Them and their far-flung Empire!Can't fling it too far for me.He-he-he!'And then Father's voice,a quiet,worried,conscientious kind of voice,coming back at him with the white man's burden and our dooty to the pore blacks whom these here Boars treated something shameful.For a week or so after Uncle Ezekiel gave it out that he was a pro-Boer and a Little Englander they were hardly on speaking terms.They had another row when the atrocity stories started.Father was very worried by the tales he'd heard,and he tackled Uncle Ezekiel about it.Little Englander or no,surely he couldn't think it right for these here Boars to throw babies in the air and catch them on their bayonets,even if they WERE only nigger babies?But Uncle Ezekiel just laughed in his face.Father had got it all wrong!It wasn't the Boars who threw babies in the air,it was the British soldiers!He kept grabbing hold of me—I must have been about five—to illustrate.'Throw them in the air and skewer them like frogs,I tell you!Same as I might throw this youngster here!'And then he'd swing me up and almost let go of me,and I had a vivid picture of myself flying through the air and landing plonk on the end of a bayonet.

Father was quite different from Uncle Ezekiel.I don't know much about my grandparents,they were dead before I was born,I only know that my grandfather had been a cobbler and late in life he married the widow of a seedsman,which was how we came to have the shop.It was a job that didn't really suit Father,though he knew the business inside out and was everlastingly working.Except on Sunday and very occasionally on week-day evenings I never remember him without meal on the backs of his hands and in the lines of his face and in what was left of his hair.He'd married when he was in his thirties and must have been nearly forty when I first remember him.He was a small man,a sort of grey,quiet little

man,always in shirtsleeves and white apron and always dusty-looking because of the meal.He had a round head,a blunt nose,a rather bushy moustache,spectacles,and butter-coloured hair,the same colour as mine,but he'd lost most of it and it was always mealy.My grandfather had bettered himself a good deal by marrying the seedsman's widow,and Father had been educated at Walton Grammar School,where the farmers and the better-off tradesmen sent their sons,whereas Uncle Ezekiel liked to boast that he'd never been to school in his life and had taught himself to read by a tallow candle after working hours.But he was a much quicker-witted man than Father,he could argue with anybody,and he used to quote Carlyle and Spencer by the yard.Father had a slow sort of mind,he'd never taken to'book-learning',as he called it,and his English wasn't good.On Sunday afternoons,the only time when he really took things easy,he'd settle down by the parlour fireplace to have what he called a'good read'at the Sunday paper.His favourite paper was The People—Mother preferred the News of the World,which she considered had more murders in it.I can see them now.A Sunday afternoon—summer,of course,always summer—a smell of roast pork and greens still floating in the air,and Mother on one side of the fireplace,starting off to read the latest murder but gradually falling asleep with her mouth open,and Father on the other,in slippers and spectacles,working his way slowly through the yards of smudgy print.And the soft feeling of summer all round you,the geranium in the window,a starling cooing somewhere,and myself under the table with the B.O.P.,making believe that the tablecloth is a tent.Afterwards,at tea,as he chewed his way through the radishes and spring onions,Father would talk in a ruminative kind of way about the stuff he'd been reading,the fires and shipwrecks and scandals in high society,and these here new flying machines and the chap(I notice that to this day he turns up in the Sunday papers about once in three years)who was swallowed by a

whale in the Red Sea and taken out three days later, alive but bleached white by the whale's gastric juice. Father was always a bit sceptical of this story, and of the new flying machines, otherwise he believed everything he read. Until 1909 no one in Lower Binfield believed that human beings would ever learn to fly. The official doctrine was that if God had meant us to fly He'd have given us wings. Uncle Ezekiel couldn't help retorting that if God had meant us to ride He'd have given us wheels, but even he didn't believe in the new flying machines.

It was only on Sunday afternoons, and perhaps on the one evening a week when he looked in at the George for a half-pint, that Father turned his mind to such things. At other times he was always more or less overwhelmed by business. There wasn't really such a lot to do, but he seemed to be always busy, either in the loft behind the yard, struggling about with sacks and bales, or in the kind of dusty little cubby-hole behind the counter in the shop, adding figures up in a notebook with a stump of pencil. He was a very honest man and a very obliging man, very anxious to provide good stuff and swindle nobody, which even in those days wasn't the best way to get on in business. He would have been just the man for some small official job, a postmaster, for instance, or station-master of a country station. But he hadn't either the cheek and enterprise to borrow money and expand the business, or the imagination to think of new selling-lines. It was characteristic of him that the only streak of imagination he ever showed, the invention of a new seed mixture for cage-birds (Bowling's Mixture it was called, and it was famous over a radius of nearly five miles) was really due to Uncle Ezekiel. Uncle Ezekiel was a bit of a bird-fancier and had quantities of goldfinches in his dark little shop. It was his theory that cage-birds lose their colour because of lack of variation in their diet. In the yard behind the shop Father had a tiny plot of ground in which he used to grow

about twenty kinds of weed under wire-netting, and he used to dry them and mix their seeds with ordinary canary seed. Jackie, the bullfinch who hung in the shop-window, was supposed to be an advertisement for Bowling's Mixture. Certainly, unlike most bullfinches in cages, Jackie never turned black.

Mother was fat ever since I remember her. No doubt it's from her that I inherit my pituitary deficiency, or whatever it is that makes you get fat.

She was a largish woman, a bit taller than Father, with hair a good deal fairer than his and a tendency to wear black dresses. But except on Sundays I never remember her without an apron. It would be an exaggeration, but not a very big one, to say that I never remember her when she wasn't cooking. When you look back over a long period you seem to see human beings always fixed in some special place and some characteristic attitude. It seems to you that they were always doing exactly the same thing. Well, just as when I think of Father I remember him always behind the counter, with his hair all mealy, adding up figures with a stump of pencil which he moistens between his lips, and just as I remember Uncle Ezekiel, with his ghostly white whiskers, straightening himself out and slapping his leather apron, so when I think of Mother I remember her at the kitchen table, with her forearms covered with flour, rolling out a lump of dough.

You know the kind of kitchen people had in those days. A huge place, rather dark and low, with a great beam across the ceiling and a stone floor and cellars underneath. Everything enormous, or so it seemed to me when I was a kid. A vast stone sink which didn't have a tap but an iron pump, a dresser covering one wall and going right up to the ceiling, a gigantic range which burned half a ton a month and took God knows how long to blacklead. Mother at the table

rolling out a huge flap of dough.And myself crawling round,messing about with bundles of firewood and lumps of coal and tin beetle-traps(we had them in all the dark corners and they used to be baited with beer)and now and again coming up to the table to try and cadge a bit of food.Mother'didn't hold with'eating between meals.You generally got the same answer:'Get along with you,now! I'm not going to have you spoiling your dinner.Your eye's bigger than your belly.'very occasionally,however,she'd cut you off a thin strip of candied peel.

I used to like to watch Mother rolling pastry.There's always a fascination in watching anybody do a job which he really understands.Watch a woman—a woman who really knows how to cook,I mean—rolling dough.She's got a peculiar,solemn,indrawn air,a satisfied kind of air,like a priestess celebrating a sacred rite.And in her own mind,of course,that's exactly what she is.Mother had thick,pink,strong forearms which were generally mottled with flour.When she was cooking,all her movements were wonderfully precise and firm.In her hands egg-whisks and mincers and rolling-pins did exactly what they were meant to do.When you saw her cooking you knew that she was in a world where she belonged,among things she really understood.Except through the Sunday papers and an occasional bit of gossip the outside world didn't really exist for her.Although she read more easily than Father,and unlike him used to read novelettes as well as newspapers,she was unbelievably ignorant.I realised this even by the time I was ten years old.She certainly couldn't have told you whether Ireland was east or west of England,and I doubt whether any time up to the outbreak of the Great War she could have told you who was Prime Minister.Moreover she hadn't the smallest wish to know such things.Later on when I read books about Eastern countries where they practise polygamy,and the secret harems

where the women are locked up with black eunuchs mounting guard over them,I used to think how shocked Mother would have been if she'd heard of it.I can almost hear her voice—'Well,now! Shutting their wives up like that!The IDEA!'Not that she'd have known what a eunuch was.But in reality she lived her life in a space that must have been as small and almost as private as the average zenana.Even in our own house there were parts where she never set foot.She never went into the loft behind the yard and very seldom into the shop.I don't think I ever remember her serving a customer.She wouldn't have known where any of the things were kept,and until they were milled into flour she probably didn't know the difference between wheat and oats.Why should she?The shop was Father's business,it was'the man's work',and even about the money side of it she hadn't very much curiosity.Her job,'the woman's work',was to look after the house and the meals and the laundry and the children.She'd have had a fit if she'd seen Father or anyone else of the male sex trying to sew on a button for himself.

So far as the meals and so forth went,ours was one of those houses where everything goes like clockwork.Or no,not like clockwork,which suggests something mechanical.It was more like some kind of natural process.You knew that breakfast would be on the table tomorrow morning in much the same way as you knew the sun would rise.All through her life Mother went to bed at nine and got up at five,and she'd have thought it vaguely wicked—sort of decadent and foreign and aristocratic—to keep later hours.Although she didn't mind paying Katie Simmons to take Joe and me out for walks,she would never tolerate the idea of having a woman in to help with the housework.It was her firm belief that a hired woman always sweeps the dirt under the dresser.Our meals were always ready on the tick.Enormous meals—boiled beef and dumplings,roast beef and Yorkshire,boiled mutton and capers,pig's head,apple

pie,spotted dog,and jam roly-poly—with grace before and after.The old ideas about bringing up children still held good,though they were going out fast.In theory children were still thrashed and put to bed on bread and water,and certainly you were liable to be sent away from table if you made too much noise eating,or choked,or refused something that was'good for you',or'answered back'.In practice there wasn't much discipline in our family,and of the two Mother was the firmer.Father,though he was always quoting'Spare the rod and spoil the child',was really much too weak with us,especially with Joe,who was a hard case from the start.He was always'going to'give Joe a good hiding,and he used to tell us stories,which I now believe were lies,about the frightful thrashings his own father used to give him with a leather strap,but nothing ever came of it.By the time Joe was twelve he was too strong for Mother to get him across her knee,and after that there was no doing anything with him.

At that time it was still thought proper for parents to say'don't'to their children all day long.You'd often hear a man boasting that he'd'thrash the life out of his son if he caught him smoking,or stealing apples,or robbing a bird's nest.In some families these thrashings actually took place.Old Lovegrove,the saddler,caught his two sons,great lumps aged sixteen and fifteen,smoking in the garden shed and walloped them so that you could hear it all over the town.Lovegrove was a very heavy smoker.The thrashings never seemed to have any effect,all boys stole apples,robbed birds'nests,and learned to smoke sooner or later,but the idea was still knocking around that children should be treated rough.Practically everything worth doing was forbidden,in theory anyway.According to Mother,everything that a boy ever wants to do was'dangerous'.Swimming was dangerous,climbing trees was dangerous,and so were sliding,snowballing,hanging on

behind carts,using catapults and squailers,and even fishing.All animals were dangerous,except Nailer,the two cats,and Jackie the bullfinch.Every animal had its special recognised methods of attacking you.Horses bit,bats got into your hair,earwigs got into your ears,swans broke your leg with a blow of their wings,bulls tossed you,and snakes'stung'.All snakes stung,according to Mother,and when I quoted the penny encyclopedia to the effect that they didn't sting but bit,she only told me not to answer back.Lizards,slow-worms,toads,frogs,and newts also stung.All insects stung,except flies and blackbeetles.Practically all kinds of food,except the food you had at meals,were either poisonous or'bad for you'.Raw potatoes were deadly poison,and so were mushrooms unless you bought them at the greengrocer's.Raw gooseberries gave you colic and raw raspberries gave you a skin-rash.If you had a bath after a meal you died of cramp,if you cut yourself between the thumb and forefinger you got lockjaw,and if you washed your hands in the water eggs were boiled in you got warts.Nearly everything in the shop was poisonous,which was why Mother had put the gate in the doorway.Cowcake was poisonous,and so was chicken corn,and so were mustard seed and Karswood poultry spice.Sweets were bad for you and eating between meals was bad for you,though curiously enough there were certain kinds of eating between meals that Mother always allowed.When she was making plum jam she used to let us eat the syrupy stuff that was skimmed off the top,and we used to gorge ourselves with it till we were sick.Although nearly everything in the world was either dangerous or poisonous,there were certain things that had mysterious virtues.Raw onions were a cure for almost everything.A stocking tied round your neck was a cure for a sore throat.Sulphur in a dog's drinking water acted as a tonic,and old Nailer's bowl behind the back door always had a lump of sulphur in it which stayed there year after year,never dissolving.

We used to have tea at six. By four Mother had generally finished the housework, and between four and six she used to have a quiet cup of tea and 'read her paper', as she called it. As a matter of fact she didn't often read the newspaper except on Sundays. The week-day papers only had the day's news, and it was only occasionally that there was a murder. But the editors of the Sunday papers had grasped that people don't really mind whether their murders are up to date and when there was no new murder on hand they'd hash up an old one, sometimes going as far back as Dr. Palmer and Mrs. Manning. I think Mother thought of the world outside Lower Binfield chiefly as a place where murders were committed. Murders had a terrible fascination for her, because, as she often said, she just didn't know how people could BE so wicked. Cutting their wives' throats, burying their fathers under cement floors, throwing babies down wells! How anyone could DO such things! The Jack the Ripper scare had happened about the time when Father and Mother were married, and the big wooden shutters we used to draw over the shop windows every night dated from then. Shutters for shop windows were going out, most of the shops in the High Street didn't have them, but Mother felt safer behind them. All along, she said, she'd had a dreadful feeling that Jack the Ripper was hiding in Lower Binfield. The Crippen case—but that was years later, when I was almost grown up—upset her badly. I can hear her voice now. 'Cutting his poor wife up and burying her in the coal cellar! The IDEA! What I'd do to that man if I got hold of him!' And curiously enough, when she thought of the dreadful wickedness of that little American doctor who dismembered his wife (and made a very neat job of it by taking all the bones out and chucking the head into the sea, if I remember rightly) the tears actually came into her eyes.

But what she mostly read on week-days was Hilda's Home

Companion. In those days it was part of the regular furnishing of any home like ours, and as a matter of fact it still exists, though it's been a bit crowded out by the more streamlined women's papers that have come up since the war. I had a look at a copy only the other day. It's changed, but less than most things. There are still the same enormous serial stories that go on for six months (and it all comes right in the end with orange blossoms to follow), and the same Household Hints, and the same ads for sewing-machines and remedies for bad legs. It's chiefly the print and the illustrations that have changed. In those days the heroine had to look like an egg-timer and now she has to look like a cylinder. Mother was a slow reader and believed in getting her threepenny-worth out of Hilda's Home Companion. Sitting in the old yellow armchair beside the hearth, with her feet on the iron fender and the little pot of strong tea stewing on the hob, she'd work her way steadily from cover to cover, right through the serial, the two short stories, the Household Hints, the ads for Zam-Buk, and the answers to correspondents. Hilda's Home Companion generally lasted her the week out, and some weeks she didn't even finish it. Sometimes the heat of the fire, or the buzzing of the bluebottles on summer afternoons, would send her off into a doze, and at about a quarter to six she'd wake up with a tremendous start, glance at the clock on the mantelpiece, and then get into a stew because tea was going to be late. But tea was never late.

In those days—till 1909, to be exact—Father could still afford an errand boy, and he used to leave the shop to him and come into tea with the backs of his hands all mealy. Then Mother would stop cutting slices of bread for a moment and say, 'If you'll give us grace, Father', and Father, while we all bent our heads on our chests, would mumble reverently, 'Fwat we bout to receive—Lord make us truly thankful—Amen.' Later on, when Joe was a bit older, it

would be'YOU give us grace today,Joe',and Joe would pipe it out.Mother never said grace:it had to be someone of the male sex.

There were always bluebottles buzzing on summer afternoons.Ours wasn't a sanitary house,precious few houses in Lower Binfield were.I suppose the town must have contained five hundred houses and there certainly can't have been more than ten with bathrooms or fifty with what we should now describe as a W.C.In summer our backyard always smelt of dustbins.And all houses had insects in them.We had blackbeetles in the wainscoting and crickets somewhere behind the kitchen range,besides,of course,the meal-worms in the shop.In those days even a house-proud woman like Mother didn't see anything to object to in blackbeetles.They were as much a part of the kitchen as the dresser or the rolling-pin.But there were insects and insects.The houses in the bad street behind the brewery,where Katie Simmons lived,were overrun by bugs.Mother or any of the shopkeepers'wives would have died of shame if they'd had bugs in the house.In fact it was considered proper to say that you didn't even know a bug by sight.

The great blue flies used to come sailing into the larder and sit longingly on the wire covers over the meat.'Drat the flies!'people used to say,but the flies were an act of God and apart from meat-covers and fly-papers you couldn't do much about them.I said a little while back that the first thing I remember is the smell of sainfoin,but the smell of dustbins is also a pretty early memory.When I think of Mother's kitchen,with the stone floor and the beetle-traps and the steel fender and the blackleaded range,I always seem to hear the bluebottles buzzing and smell the dustbin,and also old Nailer,who carried a pretty powerful smell of dog.And God knows there are worse smells and sounds.Which would you sooner listen to,a bluebottle or a bombing plane?

Joe started going to Walton Grammar School two years before I did. Neither of us went there till we were nine. It meant a four-mile bike ride morning and evening, and Mother was scared of allowing us among the traffic, which by that time included a very few motor-cars.

For several years we went to the dame-school kept by old Mrs. Howlett. Most of the shopkeepers' children went there, to save them from the shame and come-down of going to the board school, though everyone knew that Mother Howlett was an old imposter and worse than useless as a teacher. She was over seventy, she was very deaf, she could hardly see through her spectacles, and all she owned in the way of equipment was a cane, a blackboard, a few dog-eared grammar books, and a couple of dozen smelly slates. She could just manage the girls, but the boys simply laughed at her and played truant as often as they felt like it. Once there was a frightful scandal cause a boy put his hand up a girl's dress, a thing I didn't understand at the time. Mother Howlett succeeded in hushing it up. When you did something particularly bad her formula was 'I'll tell your father', and on very rare occasions she did so. But we were quite sharp enough to see that she daren't do it too often, and even when she let out at you with the cane she was so old and clumsy that it was easy to dodge.

Joe was only eight when he got in with a tough gang of boys who called themselves the Black Hand. The leader was Sid Lovegrove, the saddler's younger son, who was about thirteen, and there were two other shopkeepers' sons, an errand boy from the brewery, and two farm lads who sometimes managed to cut work and go off with the gang for a couple of hours. The farm lads were great lumps bursting out of corduroy breeches, with very broad

accents and rather looked down on by the rest of the gang, but they were tolerated because they knew twice as much about animals as any of the others. One of them, nicknamed Ginger, would even catch a rabbit in his hands occasionally. If he saw one lying in the grass he used to fling himself on it like a spread-eagle. There was a big social distinction between the shopkeepers' sons and the sons of labourers and farm-hands, but the local boys didn't usually pay much attention to it till they were about sixteen. The gang had a secret password and an 'ordeal' which included cutting your finger and eating an earthworm, and they gave themselves out to be frightful desperadoes. Certainly they managed to make a nuisance of themselves, broke windows, chased cows, tore the knockers off doors, and stole fruit by the hundredweight. Sometimes in winter they managed to borrow a couple of ferrets and go ratting, when the farmers would let them. They all had catapults and squailers, and they were always saving up to buy a saloon pistol, which in those days cost five shillings, but the savings never amounted to more than about threepence. In summer they used to go fishing and bird-nesting. When Joe was at Mrs. Howlett's he used to cut school at least once a week, and even at the Grammar School he managed it about once a fortnight. There was a boy at the Grammar School, an auctioneer's son, who could copy any handwriting and for a penny he'd forge a letter from your mother saying you'd been ill yesterday. Of course I was wild to join the Black Hand, but Joe always choked me off and said they didn't want any blasted kids hanging round.

It was the thought of going fishing that really appealed to me. At eight years old I hadn't yet been fishing, except with a penny net, with which you can sometimes catch a stickleback. Mother was always terrified of letting us go anywhere near water. She forbade fishing, in the way in which parents in those

days'forbade'almost everything,and I hadn't yet grasped that grown-ups can't see round corners.But the thought of fishing sent me wild with excitement.Many a time I'd been past the pool at the Mill Farm and watched the small carp basking on the surface,and sometimes under the willow tree at the corner a great diamond-shaped carp that to my eyes looked enormous—six inches long,I suppose—would suddenly rise to the surface,gulp down a grub,and sink again.I'd spent hours gluing my nose against the window of Wallace's in the High Street,where fishing tackle and guns and bicycles were sold.I used to lie awake on summer mornings thinking of the tales Joe had told me about fishing,how you mixed bread paste,how your float gives a bob and plunges under and you feel the rod bending and the fish tugging at the line.Is it any use talking about it,I wonder—the sort of fairy light that fish and fishing tackle have in a kid's eyes?Some kids feel the same about guns and shooting,some feel it about motor-bikes or aeroplanes or horses.It's not a thing that you can explain or rationalise,it's merely magic.One morning—it was in June and I must have been eight—I knew that Joe was going to cut school and go out fishing,and I made up my mind to follow.In some way Joe guessed what I was thinking about,and he started on me while we were dressing.

'Now then,young George!Don't you get thinking you're coming with the gang today.You stay back home.'

'No,I didn't.I didn't think nothing about it.'

'Yes,you did!You thought you were coming with the gang.'

'No,I didn't!'

'Yes,you did!'

'No,I didn't!'

'Yes,you did!You stay back home.We don't want any bloody kids along.'

Joe had just learned the word'bloody'and was always using it.Father overheard him once and swore that he'd thrash the life out of Joe,but as usual he didn't do so.After breakfast Joe started off on his bike,with his satchel and his Grammar School cap,five minutes early as he always did when he meant to cut school,and when it was time for me to leave for Mother Howlett's I sneaked off and hid in the lane behind the allotments.I knew the gang were going to the pond at the Mill Farm,and I was going to follow them if they murdered me for it.Probably they'd give me a hiding,and probably I wouldn't get home to dinner,and then Mother would know that I'd cut school and I'd get another hiding,but I didn't care.I was just desperate to go fishing with the gang.I was cunning,too.I allowed Joe plenty of time to make a circuit round and get to the Mill Farm by road,and then I followed down the lane and skirted round the meadows on the far side of the hedge,so as to get almost to the pond before the gang saw me.It was a wonderful June morning.The buttercups were up to my knees.There was a breath of wind just stirring the tops of the elms,and the great green clouds of leaves were sort of soft and rich like silk.And it was nine in the morning and I was eight years old,and all round me it was early summer,with great tangled hedges where the wild roses were still in bloom,and bits of soft white cloud drifting overhead,and in the distance the low hills and the dim blue masses of the woods round Upper Binfield.And I didn't give a damn for any of it.All I was thinking of was the green pool and the carp and the gang with their hooks and lines and bread paste.It was as though they were in paradise and I'd got to join them.Presently I managed to sneak up on them—four of them,Joe and Sid Lovegrove and the errand boy and another shopkeeper's son,Harry Barnes I think his name was.

Joe turned and saw me.'Christ!'he said.'It's the kid.'He walked up to me like a tom-cat that's going to start a fight.'Now then,you! What'd I tell you?You get back'ome double quick.'

Both Joe and I were inclined to drop our aitches if we were at all excited.I backed away from him.

'I'm not going back'ome.'

'Yes you are.'

'Clip his ear,Joe,'said Sid.'We don't want no kids along.'

'ARE you going back'ome?'said Joe.

'No.'

'Righto,my boy!Right-HO!'

Then he started on me.The next minute he was chasing me round,catching me one clip after another.But I didn't run away from the pool,I ran in circles.Presently he'd caught me and got me down,and then he knelt on my upper arms and began screwing my ears,which was his favourite torture and one I couldn't stand.I was blubbing by this time,but still I wouldn't give in and promise to go home.I wanted to stay and go fishing with the gang.And suddenly the others swung round in my favour and told Joe to get up off my chest and let me stay if I wanted to.So I stayed after all.

The others had some hooks and lines and floats and a lump of bread paste in a rag,and we all cut ourselves willow switches from the tree at the corner of the pool.The farmhouse was only about two hundred yards away,and you had to keep out of sight because old Brewer was very down on fishing.Not that it made any difference to him,he only used the pool for watering his cattle,but he hated

boys. The others were still jealous of me and kept telling me to get out of the light and reminding me that I was only a kid and knew nothing about fishing. They said that I was making such a noise I'd scare all the fish away, though actually I was making about half as much noise as anyone else there. Finally they wouldn't let me sit beside them and sent me to another part of the pool where the water was shallower and there wasn't so much shade. They said a kid like me was sure to keep splashing the water and frighten the fish away. It was a rotten part of the pool, a part where no fish would ordinarily come. I knew that. I seemed to know by a kind of instinct the places where a fish would lie. Still, I was fishing at last. I was sitting on the grass bank with the rod in my hands, with the flies buzzing round, and the smell of wild peppermint fit to knock you down, watching the red float on the green water, and I was happy as a tinker although the tear-marks mixed up with dirt were still all over my face.

Lord knows how long we sat there. The morning stretched out and out, and the sun got higher and higher, and nobody had a bite. It was a hot still day, too clear for fishing. The floats lay on the water with never a quiver. You could see deep down into the water as though you were looking into a kind of dark green glass. Out in the middle of the pool you could see the fish lying just under the surface, sunning themselves, and sometimes in the weeds near the side a newt would come gliding upwards and rest there with his fingers on the weeds and his nose just out of the water. But the fish weren't biting. The others kept shouting that they'd got a nibble, but it was always a lie. And the time stretched out and out and it got hotter and hotter, and the flies ate you alive, and the wild peppermint under the bank smelt like Mother Wheeler's sweet-shop. I was getting hungrier and hungrier, all the more because I didn't know for certain where my dinner was coming from. But I sat

as still as a mouse and never took my eyes off the float. The others had given me a lump of bait about the size of a marble, telling me that would have to do for me, but for a long time I didn't even dare to re-bait my hook, because every time I pulled my line up they swore I was making enough noise to frighten every fish within five miles.

I suppose we must have been there about two hours when suddenly my float gave a quiver. I knew it was a fish. It must have been a fish that was just passing accidentally and saw my bait. There's no mistaking the movement your float gives when it's a real bite. It's quite different from the way it moves when you twitch your line accidentally. The next moment it gave a sharp bob and almost went under. I couldn't hold myself in any longer. I yelled to the others:

'I've got a bite!'

'Rats!' yelled Sid Lovegrove instantly.

But the next moment there wasn't any doubt about it. The float dived straight down, I could still see it under the water, kind of dim red, and I felt the rod tighten in my hand. Christ, that feeling! The line jerking and straining and a fish on the other end of it! The others saw my rod bending, and the next moment they'd all flung their rods down and rushed round to me. I gave a terrific haul and the fish—a great huge silvery fish—came flying up through the air. The same moment all of us gave a yell of agony. The fish had slipped off the hook and fallen into the wild peppermint under the bank. But he'd fallen into shallow water where he couldn't turn over, and for perhaps a second he lay there on his side helpless. Joe flung himself into the water, splashing us all over, and grabbed him in both hands. 'I got'im!' he yelled. The next moment he'd flung the fish on to

the grass and we were all kneeling round it. How we gloated! The poor dying brute flapped up and down and his scales glistened all the colours of the rainbow. It was a huge carp, seven inches long at least, and must have weighed a quarter of a pound. How we shouted to see him! But the next moment it was as though a shadow had fallen across us. We looked up, and there was old Brewer standing over us, with his tall billycock hat—one of those hats they used to wear that were a cross between a top hat and a bowler—and his cowhide gaiters and a thick hazel stick in his hand.

We suddenly cowered like partridges when there's a hawk overhead. He looked from one to other of us. He had a wicked old mouth with no teeth in it, and since he'd shaved his beard off his chin looked like a nutcracker.

'What are you boys doing here?' he said.

There wasn't much doubt about what we were doing. Nobody answered.

'I'll learn'ee come fishing in my pool!' he suddenly roared, and the next moment he was on us, whacking out in all directions.

The Black Hand broke and fled. We left all the rods behind and also the fish. Old Brewer chased us half across the meadow. His legs were stiff and he couldn't move fast, but he got in some good swipes before we were out of his reach. We left him in the middle of the field, yelling after us that he knew all our names and was going to tell our fathers. I'd been at the back and most of the wallops had landed on me. I had some nasty red weals on the calves of my legs when we got to the other side of the hedge.

I spent the rest of the day with the gang. They hadn't made up their mind whether I was really a member yet, but for the time

being they tolerated me. The errand boy, who'd had the morning off on some lying pretext or other, had to go back to the brewery. The rest of us went for a long, meandering, scrounging kind of walk, the sort of walk that boys go for when they're away from home all day, and especially when they're away without permission. It was the first real boy's walk I'd had, quite different from the walks we used to go with Katie Simmons. We had our dinner in a dry ditch on the edge of the town, full of rusty cans and wild fennel. The others gave me bits of their dinner, and Sid Lovegrove had a penny, so someone fetched a Penny Monster which we had between us. It was very hot, and the fennel smelt very strong, and the gas of the Penny Monster made us belch. Afterwards we wandered up the dusty white road to Upper Binfield, the first time I'd been that way, I believe, and into the beech woods with the carpets of dead leaves and the great smooth trunks that soar up into the sky so that the birds in the upper branches look like dots. You could go wherever you liked in the woods in those days. Binfield House, was shut up, they didn't preserve the pheasants any longer, and at the worst you'd only meet a carter with a load of wood. There was a tree that had been sawn down, and the rings of the trunk looked like a target, and we had shots at it with stones. Then the others had shots at birds with their catapults, and Sid Lovegrove swore he'd hit a chaffinch and it had stuck in a fork in the tree. Joe said he was lying, and they argued and almost fought. Then we went down into a chalk hollow full of beds of dead leaves and shouted to hear the echo. Someone shouted a dirty word, and then we said over all the dirty words we knew, and the others jeered at me because I only knew three. Sid Lovegrove said he knew how babies were born and it was just the same as rabbits except that the baby came out of the woman's navel. Harry Barnes started to carve the word—on a beech tree, but got fed up with it after the first two letters. Then we went round by the lodge of Binfield House. There was a rumour that somewhere in the

grounds there was a pond with enormous fish in it, but no one ever dared go inside because old Hodges, the lodge-keeper who acted as a kind of caretaker, was down on boys. He was digging in his vegetable garden by the lodge when we passed. We cheeked him over the fence until he chased us off, and then we went down to the Walton Road and cheeked the carters, keeping on the other side of the hedge so that they couldn't reach us with their whips. Beside the Walton Road there was a place that had been a quarry and then a rubbish dump, and finally had got overgrown with blackberry bushes. There were great mounds of rusty old tin cans and bicycle frames and saucepans with holes in them and broken bottles with weeds growing all over them, and we spent nearly an hour and got ourselves filthy from head to foot routing out iron fence posts, because Harry Barnes swore that the blacksmith in Lower Binfield would pay sixpence a hundredweight for old iron. Then Joe found a late thrush's nest with half-fledged chicks in it in a blackberry bush. After a lot of argument about what to do with them we took the chicks out, had shots at them with stones, and finally stamped on them. There were four of them, and we each had one to stamp on. It was getting on towards tea-time now. We knew that old Brewer would be as good as his word and there was a hiding ahead of us, but we were getting too hungry to stay out much longer. Finally we trailed home, with one more row on the way, because when we were passing the allotments we saw a rat and chased it with sticks, and old Bennet the station-master, who worked at his allotment every night and was very proud of it, came after us in a tearing rage because we'd trampled on his onion-bed.

I'd walked ten miles and I wasn't tired. All day I'd trailed after the gang and tried to do everything they did, and they'd called me 'the kid' and snubbed me as much as they could, but I'd more or less kept my end up. I had a wonderful feeling inside me, a feeling

you can't know about unless you've had it—but if you're a man you'll have had it some time. I knew that I wasn't a kid any longer, I was a boy at last. And it's a wonderful thing to be a boy, to go roaming where grown-ups can't catch you, and to chase rats and kill birds and shy stones and cheek carters and shout dirty words. It's a kind of strong, rank feeling, a feeling of knowing everything and fearing nothing, and it's all bound up with breaking rules and killing things. The white dusty roads, the hot sweaty feeling of one's clothes, the smell of fennel and wild peppermint, the dirty words, the sour stink of the rubbish dump, the taste of fizzy lemonade and the gas that made one belch, the stamping on the young birds, the feel of the fish straining on the line—it was all part of it. Thank God I'm a man, because no woman ever has that feeling.

Sure enough, old Brewer had sent round and told everybody. Father looked very glum, fetched a strap out of the shop, and said he was going to thrash the life out of Joe. But Joe struggled and yelled and kicked, and in the end Father didn't get in more than a couple of whacks at him. However, he got a caning from the headmaster of the Grammar School next day. I tried to struggle too, but I was small enough for Mother to get me across her knee, and she gave me what-for with the strap. So I'd had three hidings that day, one from Joe, one from old Brewer, and one from Mother. Next day the gang decided that I wasn't really a member yet and that I'd got to go through the 'ordeal' (a word they'd got out of the Red Indian stories) after all. They were very strict in insisting that you had to bite the worm before you swallowed it. Moreover, because I was the youngest and they were jealous of me for being the only one to catch anything, they all made out afterwards that the fish I'd caught wasn't really a big one. In a general way the tendency of fish, when people talk about them, is to get bigger and bigger, but this one got smaller and smaller, until to

hear the others talk you'd have thought it was no bigger than a minnow.

But it didn't matter.I'd been fishing.I'd seen the float dive under the water and felt the fish tugging at the line,and however many lies they told they couldn't take that away from me.

4

For the next seven years,from when I was eight to when I was fifteen,what I chiefly remember is fishing.

Don't think that I did nothing else.It's only that when you look back over a long period of time,certain things seem to swell up till they overshadow everything else.I left Mother Howlett's and went to the Grammar School,with a leather satchel and a black cap with yellow stripes,and got my first bicycle and a long time afterwards my first long trousers.My first bike was a fixed-wheel—free-wheel bikes were very expensive then.When you went downhill you put your feet up on the front rests and let the pedals go whizzing round.That was one of the characteristic sights of the early nineteen-hundreds—a boy sailing downhill with his head back and his feet up in the air.I went to the Grammar School in fear and trembling,because of the frightful tales Joe had told me about old Whiskers(his name was Wicksey)the headmaster,who was certainly a dreadful-looking little man,with a face just like a wolf,and at the end of the big schoolroom he had a glass case with canes in it,which he'd sometimes take out and swish through the air in a terrifying manner.But to my surprise I did rather well at school.It had never occurred to me that I might be cleverer than Joe,who was two years older than me and had bullied me ever since he could walk.Actually Joe was an utter dunce,got the cane about once a week,and stayed somewhere near the bottom of the school till he

was sixteen. My second term I took a prize in arithmetic and another in some queer stuff that was mostly concerned with pressed flowers and went by the name of Science, and by the time I was fourteen Whiskers was talking about scholarships and Reading University. Father, who had ambitions for Joe and me in those days, was very anxious that I should go to 'college'. There was an idea floating round that I was to be a schoolteacher and Joe was to be an auctioneer.

But I haven't many memories connected with school. When I've mixed with chaps from the upper classes, as I did during the war, I've been struck by the fact that they never really get over that frightful drilling they go through at public schools. Either it flattens them out into half-wits or they spend the rest of their lives kicking against it. It wasn't so with boys of our class, the sons of shopkeepers and farmers. You went to the Grammar School and you stayed there till you were sixteen, just to show that you weren't a prole, but school was chiefly a place that you wanted to get away from. You'd no sentiment of loyalty, no goofy feeling about the old grey stones (and they WERE old, right enough, the school had been founded by Cardinal Wolsey), and there was no Old Boy's tie and not even a school song. You had your half-holidays to yourself, because games weren't compulsory and as often as not you cut them. We played football in braces, and though it was considered proper to play cricket in a belt, you wore your ordinary shirt and trousers. The only game I really cared about was the stump cricket we used to play in the gravel yard during the break, with a bat made out of a bit of packing case and a compo ball.

But I remember the smell of the big schoolroom, a smell of ink and dust and boots, and the stone in the yard that had been a mounting block and was used for sharpening knives on, and the little baker's shop opposite where they sold a kind of Chelsea

bun,twice the size of the Chelsea buns you get nowadays,which were called Lardy Busters and cost a halfpenny.I did all the things you do at school.I carved my name on a desk and got the cane for it—you were always caned for it if you were caught,but it was the etiquette that you had to carve your name.And I got inky fingers and bit my nails and made darts out of penholders and played conkers and passed round dirty stories and learned to masturbate and cheeked old Blowers,the English master,and bullied the life out of little Willy Simeon,the undertaker's son,who was half-witted and believed everything you told him.Our favourite trick was to send him to shops to buy things that didn't exist.All the old gags—the ha'porth of penny stamps,the rubber hammer,the left-handed screwdriver,the pot of striped paint—poor Willy fell for all of them.We had grand sport one afternoon,putting him in a tub and telling him to lift himself up by the handles.He ended up in an asylum,poor Willy.But it was in the holidays that one really lived.

There were good things to do in those days.In winter we used to borrow a couple of ferrets—Mother would never let Joe and me keep them at home,'nasty smelly things'she called them—and go round the farms and ask leave to do a bit of ratting.Sometimes they let us,sometimes they told us to hook it and said we were more trouble than the rats.Later in winter we'd follow the threshing machine and help kill the rats when they threshed the stacks.One winter,1908 it must have been,the Thames flooded and then froze and there was skating for weeks on end,and Harry Barnes broke his collar-bone on the ice.In early spring we went after squirrels with squailers,and later on we went birdnesting.We had a theory that birds can't count and it's all right if you leave one egg,but we were cruel little beasts and sometimes we'd just knock the nest down and trample on the eggs or chicks.There was another game we had when the toads were spawning.We used to catch toads,ram the

nozzle of a bicycle pump up their backsides, and blow them up till they burst. That's what boys are like, I don't know why. In summer we used to bike over the Burford Weir and bathe. Wally Lovegrove, Sid's young cousin, was drowned in 1906. He got tangled in the weeds at the bottom, and when the drag-hooks brought his body to the surface his face was jet black.

But fishing was the real thing. We went many a time to old Brewer's pool, and took tiny carp and tench out of it, and once a whopping eel, and there were other cow-ponds that had fish in them and were within walking distance on Saturday afternoons. But after we got bicycles we started fishing in the Thames below Burford Weir. It seemed more grown-up than fishing in cow-ponds. There were no farmers chasing you away, and there are some thumping fish in the Thames—though, so far as I know, nobody's ever been known to catch one.

It's queer, the feeling I had for fishing—and still have, really. I can't call myself a fisherman. I've never in my life caught a fish two feet long, and it's thirty years now since I've had a rod in my hands. And yet when I look back the whole of my boyhood from eight to fifteen seems to have revolved round the days when we went fishing. Every detail has stuck clear in my memory. I can remember individual days and individual fish, there isn't a cow-pond or a backwater that I can't see a picture of if I shut my eyes and think. I could write a book on the technique of fishing. When we were kids we didn't have much in the way of tackle, it cost too much and most of our threepence a week (which was the usual pocket-money in those days) went on sweets and Lardy Busters. Very small kids generally fish with a bent pin, which is too blunt to be much use, but you can make a pretty good hook (though of course it's got no barb) by bending a needle in a candle flame with a pair of pliers. The farm lads knew how to plait horsehair so that it was

almost as good as gut, and you can take a small fish on a single horsehair. Later we got to having two-shilling fishing-rods and even reels of sorts. God, what hours I've spent gazing into Wallace's window! Even the .410 guns and saloon pistols didn't thrill me so much as the fishing tackle. And the copy of Gamage's catalogue that I picked up somewhere, on a rubbish dump I think, and studied as though it had been the Bible! Even now I could give you all the details about gut-substitute and gimp and Limerick hooks and priests and disgorgers and Nottingham reels and God knows how many other technicalities.

Then there were the kinds of bait we used to use. In our shop there were always plenty of mealworms, which were good but not very good. Gentles were better. You had to beg them off old Gravitt, the butcher, and the gang used to draw lots or do ena-mena-mina-mo to decide who should go and ask, because Gravitt wasn't usually too pleasant about it. He was a big, rough-faced old devil with a voice like a mastiff, and when he barked, as he generally did when speaking to boys, all the knives and steels on his blue apron would give a jangle. You'd go in with an empty treacle-tin in your hand, hang round till any customers had disappeared and then say very humbly:

'Please, Mr. Gravitt, y'got any gentles today?'

Generally he'd roar out: 'What! Gentles! Gentles in my shop! Ain't seen such a thing in years. Think I got blow-flies in my shop?'

He had, of course. They were everywhere. He used to deal with them with a strip of leather on the end of a stick, with which he could reach out to enormous distances and smack a fly into paste. Sometimes you had to go away without any gentles, but as a rule he'd shout after you just as you were going:

"Ere!Go round the backyard an"ave a look.P'raps you might find one or two if you looked careful.'

You used to find them in little clusters everywhere.Gravitt's backyard smelt like a battlefield.Butchers didn't have refrigerators in those days.Gentles live longer if you keep them in sawdust.

Wasp grubs are good,though it's hard to make them stick on the hook,unless you bake them first.When someone found a wasps'nest we'd go out at night and pour turpentine down it and plug up the hole with mud.Next day the wasps would all be dead and you could dig out the nest and take the grubs.Once something went wrong,the turps missed the hole or something,and when we took the plug out the wasps,which had been shut up all night,came out all together with a zoom.We weren't very badly stung,but it was a pity there was no one standing by with a stopwatch.Grasshoppers are about the best bait there is,especially for chub.You stick them on the hook without any shot and just flick them to and fro on the surface —'dapping',they call it.But you can never get more than two or three grasshoppers at a time.Greenbottle flies,which are also damned difficult to catch,are the best bait for dace,especially on clear days.You want to put them on the hook alive,so that they wriggle.A chub will even take a wasp,but it's a ticklish job to put a live wasp on the hook.

God knows how many other baits there were.Bread paste you make by squeezing water through white bread in a rag.Then there are cheese paste and honey paste and paste with aniseed in it.Boiled wheat isn't bad for roach.Redworms are good for gudgeon.You find them in very old manure heaps.And you also find another kind of worm called a brandling,which is striped and smells like an earwig,and which is very good bait for perch.Ordinary earthworms are good for perch.You have to put them in moss to keep them fresh

and lively.If you try to keep them in earth they die.Those brown flies you find on cow-dung are pretty good for roach.You can take a chub on a cherry,so they say,and I've seen a roach taken with a currant out of a bun.

In those days,from the sixteenth of June(when the coarse-fishing season starts)till mid-winter I wasn't often without a tin of worms or gentles in my pocket.I had some fights with Mother about it,but in the end she gave in,fishing came off the list of forbidden things and Father even gave me a two-shilling fishing-rod for Christmas in 1903.Joe was barely fifteen when he started going after girls,and from then on he seldom came out fishing,which he said was a kid's game.But there were about half a dozen others who were as mad on fishing as I was.Christ,those fishing days!The hot sticky afternoons in the schoolroom when I've sprawled across my desk,with old Blowers's voice grating away about predicates and subjunctives and relative clauses,and all that's in my mind is the backwater near Burford Weir and the green pool under the willows with the dace gliding to and fro.And then the terrific rush on bicycles after tea,to Chamford Hill and down to the river to get in an hour's fishing before dark.The still summer evening,the faint splash of the weir,the rings on the water where the fish are rising,the midges eating you alive,the shoals of dace swarming round your hook and never biting.And the kind of passion with which you'd watch the black backs of the fish swarming round,hoping and praying(yes,literally praying)that one of them would change his mind and grab your bait before it got too dark.And then it was always'Let's have five minutes more',and then'Just five minutes more',until in the end you had to walk your bike into the town because Towler,the copper,was prowling round and you could be'had up'for riding without a light.And the times in the summer holidays when we went out to make a day of it with

boiled eggs and bread and butter and a bottle of lemonade, and fished and bathed and then fished again and did occasionally catch something. At night you'd come home with filthy hands so hungry that you'd eaten what was left of your bread paste, with three or four smelly dace wrapped up in your handkerchief. Mother always refused to cook the fish I brought home. She would never allow that river fish were edible, except trout and salmon. 'Nasty muddy things', she called them. The fish I remember best of all are the ones I didn't catch. Especially the monstrous fish you always used to see when you went for a walk along the towpath on Sunday afternoons and hadn't a rod with you. There was no fishing on Sundays, even the Thames Conservancy Board didn't allow it. On Sundays you had to go for what was called a 'nice walk' in your thick black suit and the Eton collar that sawed your head off. It was on a Sunday that I saw a pike a yard long asleep in shallow water by the bank and nearly got him with a stone. And sometimes in the green pools on the edge of the reeds you'd see a huge Thames trout go sailing past. The trout grow to vast sizes in the Thames, but they're practically never caught. They say that one of the real Thames fishermen, the old bottle-nosed blokes that you see muffled up in overcoats on camp-stools with twenty-foot roach-poles at all seasons of the year, will willingly give up a year of his life to catching a Thames trout. I don't blame them, I see their point entirely, and still better I saw it then.

Of course other things were happening. I grew three inches in a year, got my long trousers, won some prizes at school, went to confirmation classes, told dirty stories, took to reading, and had crazes for white mice, fretwork, and postage stamps. But it's always fishing that I remember. Summer days, and the flat water-meadows and the blue hills in the distance, and the willows up the backwater and the pools underneath like a kind of deep green glass. Summer

evenings,the fish breaking the water,the nightjars hawking round your head,the smell of nightstocks and latakia.Don't mistake what I'm talking about.It's not that I'm trying to put across any of that poetry of childhood stuff.I know that's all baloney.Old Porteous(a friend of mine,a retired schoolmaster,I'll tell you about him later)is great on the poetry of childhood.Sometimes he reads me stuff about it out of books.Wordsworth.Lucy Gray.There was a time when meadow,grove—and all that.Needless to say he's got no kids of his own.The truth is that kids aren't in any way poetic,they're merely savage little animals,except that no animal is a quarter as selfish.A boy isn't interested in meadows,groves,and so forth.He never looks at a landscape,doesn't give a damn for flowers,and unless they affect him in some way,such as being good to eat,he doesn't know one plant from another.Killing things—that's about as near to poetry as a boy gets.And yet all the while there's that peculiar intensity,the power of longing for things as you can't long when you're grown up,and the feeling that time stretches out and out in front of you and that whatever you're doing you could go on for ever.

I was rather an ugly little boy,with butter-coloured hair which was always cropped short except for a quiff in front.I don't idealise my childhood,and unlike many people I've no wish to be young again.Most of the things I used to care for would leave me something more than cold.I don't care if I never see a cricket ball again,and I wouldn't give you threepence for a hundredweight of sweets.But I've still got,I've always had,that peculiar feeling for fishing.You'll think it damned silly,no doubt,but I've actually half a wish to go fishing even now,when I'm fat and forty-five and got two kids and a house in the suburbs.Why?Because in a manner of speaking I AM sentimental about my childhood—not my own particular childhood,but the civilisation which I grew up in and

which is now,I suppose,just about at its last kick.And fishing is somehow typical of that civilisation.As soon as you think of fishing you think of things that don't belong to the modern world.The very idea of sitting all day under a willow tree beside a quiet pool—and being able to find a quiet pool to sit beside—belongs to the time before the war,before the radio,before aeroplanes,before Hitler.There's a kind of peacefulness even in the names of English coarse

fish.Roach,rudd,dace,bleak,barbel,bream,gudgeon,pike,chub,carp,tench.The solid kind of names.The people who made them up hadn't heard of machine-guns,they didn't live in terror of the sack or spend their time eating aspirins,going to the pictures,and wondering how to keep out of the concentration camp.

Does anyone go fishing nowadays,I wonder?Anywhere within a hundred miles of London there are no fish left to catch.A few dismal fishing-clubs plant themselves in rows along the banks of canals,and millionaires go trout-fishing in private waters round Scotch hotels,a sort of snobbish game of catching hand-reared fish with artificial flies.But who fishes in mill-streams or moats or cow-ponds any longer?Where are the English coarse fish now?When I was a kid every pond and stream had fish in it.Now all the ponds are drained,and when the streams aren't poisoned with chemicals from factories they're full of rusty tins and motor-bike tyres.

My best fishing-memory is about some fish that I never caught.That's usual enough,I suppose.

When I was about fourteen Father did a good turn of some kind to old Hodges,the caretaker at Binfield House.I forget what it was—gave him some medicine that cured his fowls of the worms,or something.Hodges was a crabby old devil,but he didn't forget a good turn.One day a little while afterwards when he'd been down to

the shop to buy chicken-corn he met me outside the door and stopped me in his surly way. He had a face like something carved out of a bit of root, and only two teeth, which were dark brown and very long.

'Hey, young'un! Fisherman, ain't you?'

'Yes.'

'Thought you was. You listen, then. If so be you wanted to, you could bring your line and have a try in that they pool up ahind the Hall. There's plenty bream and jack in there. But don't you tell no one as I told you. And don't you go for to bring any of them other young whelps, or I'll beat the skin off their backs.'

Having said this he hobbled off with his sack of corn over his shoulder, as though feeling that he'd said too much already. The next Saturday afternoon I biked up to Binfield House with my pockets full of worms and gentles, and looked for old Hodges at the lodge. At that time Binfield House had already been empty for ten or twenty years. Mr. Farrel, the owner, couldn't afford to live in it and either couldn't or wouldn't let it. He lived in London on the rent of his farms and let the house and grounds go to the devil. All the fences were green and rotting, the park was a mass of nettles, the plantations were like a jungle, and even the gardens had gone back to meadow, with only a few old gnarled rose-bushes to show you where the beds had been. But it was a very beautiful house, especially from a distance. It was a great white place with colonnades and long-shaped windows, which had been built, I suppose, about Queen Anne's time by someone who'd travelled in Italy. If I went there now I'd probably get a certain kick out of wandering round the general desolation and thinking about the life that used to go on there, and the people who built such places

because they imagined that the good days would last for ever. As a boy I didn't give either the house or the grounds a second look. I dug out old Hodges, who'd just finished his dinner and was a bit surly, and got him to show me the way down to the pool. It was several hundred yards behind the house and completely hidden in the beech woods, but it was a good-sized pool, almost a lake, about a hundred and fifty yards across. It was astonishing, and even at that age it astonished me, that there, a dozen miles from Reading and not fifty from London, you could have such solitude. You felt as much alone as if you'd been on the banks of the Amazon. The pool was ringed completely round by the enormous beech trees, which in one place came down to the edge and were reflected in the water. On the other side there was a patch of grass where there was a hollow with beds of wild peppermint, and up at one end of the pool an old wooden boathouse was rotting among the bulrushes.

The pool was swarming with bream, small ones, about four to six inches long. Every now and again you'd see one of them turn half over and gleam reddy brown under the water. There were pike there too, and they must have been big ones. You never saw them, but sometimes one that was basking among the weeds would turn over and plunge with a splash that was like a brick being bunged into the water. It was no use trying to catch them, though of course I always tried every time I went there. I tried them with dace and minnows I'd caught in the Thames and kept alive in a jam-jar, and even with a spinner made out of a bit of tin. But they were gorged with fish and wouldn't bite, and in any case they'd have broken any tackle I possessed. I never came back from the pool without at least a dozen small bream. Sometimes in the summer holidays I went there for a whole day, with my fishing-rod and a copy of Chums or the Union Jack or something, and a hunk of bread and cheese which Mother had wrapped up for me. And I've fished for hours and then

lain in the grass hollow and read the Union Jack, and then the smell of my bread paste and the plop of a fish jumping somewhere would send me wild again, and I'd go back to the water and have another go, and so on all through a summer's day. And the best of all was to be alone, utterly alone, though the road wasn't a quarter of a mile away. I was just old enough to know that it's good to be alone occasionally. With the trees all round you it was as though the pool belonged to you, and nothing ever stirred except the fish ringing the water and the pigeons passing overhead. And yet, in the two years or so that I went fishing there, how many times did I really go, I wonder? Not more than a dozen. It was a three-mile bike ride from home and took up a whole afternoon at least. And sometimes other things turned up, and sometimes when I'd meant to go it rained. You know the way things happen.

One afternoon the fish weren't biting and I began to explore at the end of the pool farthest from Binfield House. There was a bit of an overflow of water and the ground was boggy, and you had to fight your way through a sort of jungle of blackberry bushes and rotten boughs that had fallen off the trees. I struggled through it for about fifty yards, and then suddenly there was a clearing and I came to another pool which I had never known existed. It was a small pool not more than twenty yards wide, and rather dark because of the boughs that overhung it. But it was very clear water and immensely deep. I could see ten or fifteen feet down into it. I hung about for a bit, enjoying the dampness and the rotten boggy smell, the way a boy does. And then I saw something that almost made me jump out of my skin.

It was an enormous fish. I don't exaggerate when I say it was enormous. It was almost the length of my arm. It glided across the pool, deep under water, and then became a shadow and disappeared into the darker water on the other side. I felt as if a sword had gone

through me. It was far the biggest fish I'd ever seen, dead or alive. I stood there without breathing, and in a moment another huge thick shape glided through the water, and then another and then two more close together. The pool was full of them. They were carp, I suppose. Just possibly they were bream or tench, but more probably carp. Bream or tench wouldn't grow so huge. I knew what had happened. At some time this pool had been connected with the other, and then the stream had dried up and the woods had closed round the small pool and it had just been forgotten. It's a thing that happens occasionally. A pool gets forgotten somehow, nobody fishes in it for years and decades and the fish grow to monstrous sizes. The brutes that I was watching might be a hundred years old. And not a soul in the world knew about them except me. Very likely it was twenty years since anyone had so much as looked at the pool, and probably even old Hodges and Mr. Farrel's bailiff had forgotten its existence.

Well, you can imagine what I felt. After a bit I couldn't even bear the tantalisation of watching. I hurried back to the other pool and got my fishing things together. It was no use trying for those colossal brutes with the tackle I had. They'd snap it as if it had been a hair. And I couldn't go on fishing any longer for the tiny bream. The sight of the big carp had given me a feeling in my stomach almost as if I was going to be sick. I got on to my bike and whizzed down the hill and home. It was a wonderful secret for a boy to have. There was the dark pool hidden away in the woods and the monstrous fish sailing round it—fish that had never been fished for and would grab the first bait you offered them. It was only a question of getting hold of a line strong enough to hold them. Already I'd made all the arrangements. I'd buy the tackle that would hold them if I had to steal the money out of the till. Somehow, God knew how, I'd get hold of half a crown and buy a length of silk salmon line and some thick

gut or gimp and Number 5 hooks, and come back with cheese and gentles and paste and mealworms and brandlings and grasshoppers and every mortal bait a carp might look at. The very next Saturday afternoon I'd come back and try for them.

But as it happened I never went back. One never does go back. I never stole the money out of the till or bought the bit of salmon line or had a try for those carp. Almost immediately afterwards something turned up to prevent me, but if it hadn't been that it would have been something else. It's the way things happen.

I know, of course, that you think I'm exaggerating about the size of those fish. You think, probably, that they were just medium-sized fish (a foot long, say) and that they've swollen gradually in my memory. But it isn't so. People tell lies about the fish they've caught and still more about the fish that are hooked and get away, but I never caught any of these or even tried to catch them, and I've no motive for lying. I tell you they were enormous.

5

Fishing!

Here I'll make a confession, or rather two. The first is that when I look back through my life I can't honestly say that anything I've ever done has given me quite such a kick as fishing. Everything else has been a bit of a flop in comparison, even women. I don't set up to be one of those men that don't care about women. I've spent plenty of time chasing them, and I would even now if I had the chance. Still, if you gave me the choice of having any woman you care to name, but I mean ANY woman, or catching a ten-pound carp, the carp would win every time. And the other confession is that after I was sixteen I never fished again.

Why?Because that's how things happen.Because in this life we lead—I don't mean human life in general,I mean life in this particular age and this particular country—we don't do the things we want to do.It isn't because we're always working.Even a farmhand or a Jew tailor isn't always working.It's because there's some devil in us that drives us to and fro on everlasting idiocies.There's time for everything except the things worth doing.Think of something you really care about.Then add hour to hour and calculate the fraction of your life that you've actually spent in doing it.And then calculate the time you've spent on things like shaving,riding to and fro on buses,waiting in railway,junctions,swapping dirty stories,and reading the newspapers.

After I was sixteen I didn't go fishing again.There never seemed to be time.I was at work,I was chasing girls,I was wearing my first button boots and my first high collars(and for the collars of 1909 you needed a neck like a giraffe),I was doing correspondence courses in salesmanship and accountancy and'improving my mind'.The great fish were gliding round in the pool behind Binfield House.Nobody knew about them except me.They were stored away in my mind ; some day,some bank holiday perhaps,I'd go back and catch them.But I never went back.There was time for everything except that.Curiously enough,the only time between then and now when I did very nearly go fishing was during the war.

It was in the autumn of 1916,just before I was wounded.We'd come out of trenches to a village behind the line,and though it was only September we were covered with mud from head to foot.As usual we didn't know for certain how long we were going to stay there or where we were going afterwards.Luckily the C.O.was a bit off-colour,a touch of bronchitis or something,and so didn't bother about driving us through the usual parades,kit-inspections,football

matches, and so forth which were supposed to keep up the spirits of the troops when they were out of the line. We spent the first day sprawling about on piles of chaff in the barns where we were billeted and scraping the mud off our putties, and in the evening some of the chaps started queueing up for a couple of wretched worn-out whores who were established in a house at the end of the village. In the morning, although it was against orders to leave the village, I managed to sneak off and wander round the ghastly desolation that had once been fields. It was a damp, wintry kind of morning. All round, of course, were the awful muck and litter of war, the sort of filthy sordid mess that's actually worse than a battlefield of corpses. Trees with boughs torn off them, old shell-holes that had partly filled up again, tin cans, turds, mud, weeds, clumps of rusty barbed wire with weeds growing through them. You know the feeling you had when you came out of the line. A stiffened feeling in all your joints, and inside you a kind of emptiness, a feeling that you'd never again have any interest in anything. It was partly fear and exhaustion but mainly boredom. At that time no one saw any reason why the war shouldn't go on for ever. Today or tomorrow or the day after you were going back to the line, and maybe next week a shell would blow you to potted meat, but that wasn't so bad as the ghastly boredom of the war stretching out for ever.

I was wandering up the side of a hedge when I ran into a chap in our company whose surname I don't remember but who was nicknamed Nobby. He was a dark, slouching, gypsy-looking chap, a chap who even in uniform always gave the impression that he was carrying a couple of stolen rabbits. By trade he was a coster and he was a real Cockney, but one of those Cockneys that make part of their living by hop-picking, bird-catching, poaching, and fruit-stealing in Kent and Essex. He was a great expert on dogs, ferrets, cage-

birds, fighting-cocks, and that kind of thing. As soon as he saw me he beckoned to me with his head. He had a sly, vicious way of talking:

'Ere, George! (The chaps still called me George—I hadn't got fat in those days.) 'George! Ja see that clump of poplars acrost the field?'

'Yes.'

'Well, there's a pool on t'other side of it, and it's full of bleeding great fish.'

'Fish? Garn!'

'I tell you it's bleeding full of em. Perch, they are. As good fish as ever I got my thumbs on. Com'n see fyerself, then.'

We trudged over the mud together. Sure enough, Nobby was right. On the other side of the poplars there was a dirty-looking pool with sandy banks. Obviously it had been a quarry and had got filled up with water. And it was swarming with perch. You could see their dark blue stripy backs gliding everywhere just under water, and some of them must have weighed a pound. I suppose in two years of war they hadn't been disturbed and had had time to multiply. Probably you can't imagine what the sight of those perch had done to me. It was as though they'd suddenly brought me to life. Of course there was only one thought in both our minds—how to get hold of a rod and line.

'Christ!' I said. 'We'll have some of those.'

'You bet we f—well will. C'mon back to the village and let's get 'old of some tackle.'

'O.K. You want to watch out, though. If the sergeant gets to know we'll cop it.'

'Oh,f—the sergeant.They can'ang,drore,and quarter me if they want to.I'm going to'ave some of them bleeding fish.'

You can't know how wild we were to catch those fish.Or perhaps you can,if you've ever been at war.You know the frantic boredom of war and the way you'll clutch at almost any kind of amusement.I've seen two chaps in a dugout fight like devils over half a threepenny magazine.But there was more to it than that.It was the thought of escaping,for perhaps a whole day,right out of the atmosphere of war.To be sitting under the poplar trees,fishing for perch,away from the Company,away from the noise and the stink and the uniforms and the officers and the saluting and the sergeant's voice!Fishing is the opposite of war.But it wasn't at all certain that we could bring it off.That was the thought that sent us into a kind of fever.If the sergeant found out he'd stop us as sure as fate,and so would any of the officers,and the worst of all was that there was no knowing how long we were going to stay at the village.We might stay there a week,we might march off in two hours.Meanwhile we'd no fishing tackle of any kind,not even a pin or a bit of string.We had to start from scratch.And the pool was swarming with fish!The first thing was a rod.A willow wand is best,but of course there wasn't a willow tree anywhere this side of the horizon.Nobby shinned up one of the poplars and cut off a small bough which wasn't actually good but was better than nothing.He trimmed it down with his jack-knife till it looked something like a fishing-rod,and then we hid it in the weeds near the bank and managed to sneak back into the village without being seen.

The next thing was a needle to make a hook.Nobody had a needle.One chap had some darning needles,but they were too thick and had blunt ends.We daren't let anyone know what we wanted it for,for fear the sergeant should hear about it.At last we thought of the whores at the end of the village.They were pretty sure to have a

needle. When we got there—you had to go round to the back door through a mucky courtyard—the house was shut up and the whores were having a sleep which they'd no doubt earned. We stamped and yelled and banged on the door until after about ten minutes a fat ugly woman in a wrapper came down and screamed at us in French. Nobby shouted at her:

'Needle! Needle! You got a needle!'

Of course she didn't know what he was talking about. Then Nobby tried pidgin English, which he expected her as a foreigner to understand:

'Wantee needle! Sewee clothee! Likee thisee!'

He made gestures which were supposed to represent sewing. The whore misunderstood him and opened the door a bit wider to let us in. Finally we made her understand and got a needle from her. By this time it was dinner time.

After dinner the sergeant came round the barn where we were billeted looking for men for a fatigue. We managed to dodge him just in time by getting under a pile of chaff. When he was gone we got a candle alight, made the needle red-hot, and managed to bend it into a kind of hook. We didn't have any tools except jack-knives, and we burned our fingers badly. The next thing was a line. Nobody had any string except thick stuff, but at last we came across a fellow who had a reel of sewing thread. He didn't want to part with it and we had to give him a whole packet of fags for it. The thread was much too thin, but Nobby cut it into three lengths, tied them to a nail in the wall, and carefully plaited them. Meanwhile after searching all over the village I'd managed to find a cork, and I cut it in half and stuck a match through it to make afloat. By this time it was evening and getting on towards dark.

We'd got the essentials now, but we could do with some gut. There didn't seem much hope of getting any until we thought of the hospital orderly. Surgical gut wasn't part of his equipment, but it was just possible that he might have some. Sure enough, when we asked him, we found he'd a whole hank of medical gut in his haversack. It had taken his fancy in some hospital or other and he'd pinched it. We swapped another packet of fags for ten lengths of gut. It was rotten brittle stuff, in pieces about six inches long. After dark Nobby soaked them till they were pliable and tied them end to end. So now we'd got everything—hook, rod, line, float, and gut. We could dig up worms anywhere. And the pool was swarming with fish! Huge great stripy perch crying out to be caught! We lay down to kip in such a fever that we didn't even take our boots off. Tomorrow! If we could just have tomorrow! If the war would forget about us for just a day! We made up our minds that as soon as roll-call was over we'd hook it and stay away all day, even if they gave us Field Punishment No. 1 for it when we came back.

Well, I expect you can guess the rest. At roll-call orders were to pack all kits and be ready to march in twenty minutes. We marched nine miles down the road and then got on to lorries and were shot off to another part of the line. As for the pool under the poplar trees, I never saw or heard of it again. I expect it got poisoned with mustard gas later on.

Since then I've never fished. I never seemed to get the chance. There was the rest of the war, and then like everyone else I was fighting for a job, and then I'd got a job and the job had got me. I was a promising young fellow in an insurance office—one of those keen young businessmen with firm jaws and good prospects that you used to read about in the Clark's College adverts—and then I was the usual down-trodden five-to-ten-pounds-a-weeker in a semidetached villa in the inner-outer suburbs. Such people don't go

fishing,any more than stockbrokers go out picking primroses.It wouldn't be suitable.Other recreations are provided for them.

Of course I have my fortnight's holiday every summer.You know the kind of holiday.Margate,Yarmouth,Eastbourne,Hastings,Bournemouth,Brighton.The a slight variation according to whether or not we're flush that year.With a woman like Hilda along,the chief feature of a holiday is endless mental arithmetic to decide how much the boarding-house keeper is swindling you.That and telling the kids,No,they can't have a new sandbucket.A few years back we were at Bournemouth.One fine afternoon we loitered down the pier,which must be about half a mile long,and all the way along it chaps were fishing with stumpy sea-rods with little bells on the end and their lines stretching fifty yards out to sea.It's a dull kind of fishing,and they weren't catching anything.Still,they were fishing.The kids soon got bored and clamoured to go back to the beach,and Hilda saw a chap sticking a lobworm on his hook and said it made her feel sick,but I kept loitering up and down for a little while longer.And suddenly there was a tremendous ringing from a bell and a chap was winding in his line.Everyone stopped to watch.And sure enough,in it came,the wet line and the lump of lead and on the end a great flat-fish(a flounder,I think)dangling and wriggling.The chap dumped it on to the planks of the pier,and it flapped up and down,all wet and gleaming,with its grey warty back and its white belly and the fresh salty smell of the sea.And something kind of moved inside me.

As we moved off I said casually,just to test Hilda's reaction:

'I've half a mind to do a bit of fishing myself while we're here.'

'What!YOU go fishing,George?But you don't even know how,do you?'

'Oh,I used to be a great fisherman,'I told her.

She was vaguely against it,as usual,but didn't have many ideas one way or the other,except that if I went fishing she wasn't coming with me to watch me put those nasty squashy things on the hook.Then suddenly she got on to the fact that if I was to go fishing the set-outthat I'd need,rod and reel and so forth,would cost round about a quid.The rod alone would cost ten bob.Instantly she flew into a temper.You haven't seen old Hilda when there's talk of wasting ten bob.She burst out at me:

'The IDEA of wasting all that money on a thing like that! Absurd!And how they DARE charge ten shillings for one of those silly little fishing-rods!It's disgraceful.And fancy you going fishing at your age!A great big grown-up man like you.Don't be such a BABY,George.'

Then the kids got on to it.Lorna sidled up to me and asked in that silly pert way she has,'Are you a baby,Daddy?'and little Billy,who at that time didn't speak quite plain,announced to the world in general,'Farver's a baby.'Then suddenly they were both dancing round me,rattling their sand-buckets and chanting:

'Far-ver's a baby!Far-ver's a baby!'

Unnatural little bastards!

6

And besides fishing there was reading.

I've exaggerated if I've given the impression that fishing was the ONLY thing I cared about.Fishing certainly came first,but reading was a good second.I must have been either ten or eleven when I started reading—reading voluntarily,I mean.At that age it's

like discovering a new world. I'm a considerable reader even now, in fact there aren't many weeks in which I don't get through a couple of novels. I'm what you might call the typical Boots Library subscriber, I always fall for the best-seller of the moment (The Good Companions, Bengal Lancer, Hatter's Castle—I fell for every one of them), and I've been a member of the Left Book Club for a year or more. And in 1918, when I was twenty-five, I had a sort of debauch of reading that made a certain difference to my outlook. But nothing is ever like those first years when you suddenly discover that you can open a penny weekly paper and plunge straight into thieves' kitchens and Chinese opium dens and Polynesian islands and the forests of Brazil.

It was from when I was eleven to when I was about sixteen that I got my biggest kick out of reading. At first it was always the boys' penny weeklies—little thin papers with vile print and an illustration in three colours on the cover—and a bit later it was books. Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Nikola, The Iron Pirate, Dracula, Raffles. And Nat Gould and Ranger Gull and a chap whose name I forget who wrote boxing stories almost as rapidly as Nat Gould wrote racing ones. I suppose if my parents had been a little better educated I'd have had 'good' books shoved down my throat, Dickens and Thackeray and so forth, and in fact they did drive us through Quentin Durward at school and Uncle Ezekiel sometimes tried to incite me to read Ruskin and Carlyle. But there were practically no books in our house. Father had never read a book in his life, except the Bible and Smiles's Self Help, and I didn't of my own accord read a 'good' book till much later. I'm not sorry it happened that way. I read the things I wanted to read, and I got more out of them than I ever got out of the stuff they taught me at school.

The old penny dreadfuls were already going out when I was a

kid, and I can barely remember them, but there was a regular line of boys' weeklies, some of which still exist. The Buffalo Bill stories have gone out, I think, and Nat Gould probably isn't read any longer, but Nick Carter and Sexton Blake seem to be still the same as ever. The Gem and the Magnet, if I'm remembering rightly, started about 1905. The B.O.P. was still rather pi in those days, but Chums, which I think must have started about 1903, was splendid. Then there was an encyclopedia—I don't remember its exact name—which was issued in penny numbers. It never seemed quite worth buying, but a boy at school used to give away back numbers sometimes. If I now know the length of the Mississippi or the difference between an octopus and a cuttle-fish or the exact composition of bell-metal, that's where I learned it from.

Joe never read. He was one of those boys who can go through years of schooling and at the end of it are unable to read ten lines consecutively. The sight of print made him feel sick. I've seen him pick up one of my numbers of Chums, read a paragraph or two and then turn away with just the same movement of disgust as a horse when it smells stale hay. He tried to kick me out of reading, but Mother and Father, who had decided that I was 'the clever one', backed me up. They were rather proud that I showed a taste for 'book-learning', as they called it. But it was typical of both of them that they were vaguely upset by my reading things like Chums and the Union Jack, thought that I ought to read something 'improving' but didn't know enough about books to be sure which books were 'improving'. Finally Mother got hold of a second-hand copy of Foxe's Book of Martyrs, which I didn't read, though the illustrations weren't half bad.

All through the winter of 1905 I spent a penny on Chums every week. I was following up their serial story, 'Donovan the Dauntless'. Donovan the Dauntless was an explorer who was

employed by an American millionaire to fetch incredible things from various corners of the earth.Sometimes it was diamonds the size of golf balls from the craters of volcanoes in Africa,sometimes it was petrified mammoths'tusks from the frozen forests of Siberia,sometimes it was buried Inca treasures from the lost cities of Peru.Donovan went on a new journey every week,and he always made good.My favourite place for reading was the loft behind the yard.Except when Father was getting out fresh sacks of grain it was the quietest place in the house.There were huge piles of sacks to lie on,and a sort of plasterly smell mixed up with the smell of sainfoin,and bunches of cobwebs in all the corners,and just over the place where I used to lie there was a hole in the ceiling and a lath sticking out of the plaster.I can feel the feeling of it now.A winter day,just warm enough to lie still.I'm lying on my belly with Chums open in front of me.A mouse runs up the side of a sack like a clockwork toy,then suddenly stops dead and watches me with his little eyes like tiny jet beads.I'm twelve years old,but I'm Donovan the Dauntless.Two thousand miles up the Amazon I've just pitched my tent,and the roots of the mysterious orchid that blooms once in a hundred years are safe in the tin box under my camp bed.In the forests all round Hopi-Hopi Indians,who paint their teeth scarlet and skin white men alive,are beating their war-drums.I'm watching the mouse and the mouse is watching me,and I can smell the dust and sainfoin and the cool plasterly smell,and I'm up the Amazon,and it's bliss,pure bliss.

7

That's all,really.

I've tried to tell you something about the world before the war,the world I got a sniff of when I saw King Zog's name on the poster,and the chances are that I've told you nothing.Either you

remember before the war and don't need to be told about it, or you don't remember, and it's no use telling you. So far I've only spoken about the things that happened to me before I was sixteen. Up to that time things had gone pretty well with the family. It was a bit before my sixteenth birthday that I began to get glimpses of what people call 'real life', meaning unpleasantness.

About three days after I'd seen the big carp at Binfield House, Father came in to tea looking very worried and even more grey and mealy than usual. He ate his way solemnly through his tea and didn't talk much. In those days he had a rather preoccupied way of eating, and his moustache used to work up and down with a sidelong movement, because he hadn't many back teeth left. I was just getting up from table when he called me back.

'Wait a minute, George, my boy. I got suthing to say to you. Sit down jest a minute. Mother, you heard what I got to say last night.'

Mother, behind the huge brown teapot, folded her hands in her lap and looked solemn. Father went on, speaking very seriously but rather spoiling the effect by trying to deal with a crumb that lodged somewhere in what was left of his back teeth:

'George, my boy, I got suthing to say to you. I been thinking it over, and it's about time you left school. 'Fraid you'll have to get to work now and start earning a bit to bring home to your mother. I wrote to Mr. Wicksey last night and told him as I should have to take you away.'

Of course this was quite according to precedent—his writing to Mr. Wicksey before telling me, I mean. Parents in those days, as a matter of course, always arranged everything over their children's heads.

Father went on to make some rather mumbling and worried explanations. He'd had bad times lately', things had been a bit difficult', and the upshot was that Joe and I would have to start earning our living. At that time I didn't either know or greatly care whether the business was really in a bad way or not. I hadn't even enough commercial instinct to see the reason why things were difficult'. The fact was that Father had been hit by competition. Sarazins', the big retail seedsmen who had branches all over the home counties, had stuck a tentacle into Lower Binfield. Six months earlier they'd taken the lease of a shop in the market-place and dolled it up until what with bright green paint, gilt lettering, gardening tools painted red and green, and huge advertisements for sweet peas, it hit you in the eye at a hundred yards' distance. Sarazins', besides selling flower seeds, described themselves as 'universal poultry and livestock providers', and apart from wheat and oats and so forth they went in for patent poultry mixtures, bird-seed done up in fancy packets, dog-biscuits of all shapes and colours, medicines, embrocations, and conditioning powders, and branched off into such things as rat-traps, dog-chains, incubators, sanitary eggs, bird-nesting, bulbs, weed-killer, insecticide, and even, in some branches, into what they called a 'livestock department', meaning rabbits and day-old chicks. Father, with his dusty old shop and his refusal to stock new lines, couldn't compete with that kind of thing and didn't want to. The tradesmen with their van-horses, and such of the farmers as dealt with the retail seedsmen, fought shy of Sarazins', but in six months they'd gathered in the petty gentry of the neighbourhood, who in those days had carriages or dogcarts and therefore horses. This meant a big loss of trade for Father and the other corn merchant, Winkle. I didn't grasp any of this at the time. I had a boy's attitude towards it all. I'd never taken any interest in the business. I'd never or hardly ever served in the shop, and when, as

occasionally happened,Father wanted me to run an errand or give a hand with something,such as hoisting sacks of grain up to the loft or down again,I'd always dodged it whenever possible.Boys in our class aren't such complete babies as public schoolboys,they know that work is work and sixpence is sixpence,but it seems natural for a boy to regard his father's business as a bore.Up till that time fishing-rods,bicycles,fizzy lemonade,and so forth had seemed to me a good deal more real than anything that happened in the grown-up world.

Father had already spoken to old Grimmitt,the grocer,who wanted a smart lad and was willing to take me into the shop immediately.Meanwhile Father was going to get rid of the errand boy,and Joe was to come home and help with the shop till he got a regular job.Joe had left school some time back and had been more or less loafing ever since.Father had sometimes talked of getting him into the accounts department at the brewery,and earlier had even had thoughts of making him into an auctioneer.Both were completely hopeless because Joe,at seventeen,wrote a hand like a ploughboy and couldn't repeat the multiplication table.At present he was supposed to be learning the trade at a big bicycle shop on the outskirts of Walton.Tinkering with bicycles suited Joe,who,like most half-wits,had a slight mechanical turn,but he was quite incapable of working steadily and spent all his time loafing about in greasy overalls,smoking Woodbines,getting into fights,drinking(he's started that already),getting talked of with one girl after another,and sticking Father for money.Father was worried,puzzled,and vaguely resentful.I can see him yet,with the meal on his bald head,and the bit of grey hair over his ears,and his spectacles and his grey moustache.He couldn't understand what was happening to him.For years his profits had gone up,slowly and steadily,ten pounds this year,twenty pounds that year,and now suddenly they'd gone down with a bump.He couldn't understand it.He'd inherited the business

from his father,he'd done an honest trade,worked hard,sold sound goods,swindled nobody—and his profits were going down.He said a number of times,between sucking at his teeth to get the crumb out,that times were very bad,trade seemed very slack,he couldn't think what had come over people,it wasn't as if the horses didn't have to eat.Perhaps it was these here motors,he decided finally.'Nasty smelly things!'mother put in.She was a little worried,and knew that she ought to be more so.Once or twice while Father was talking there was a far-away look in her eyes and I could see her lips moving.She was trying to decide whether it should be a round of beef and carrots tomorrow or another leg of mutton.Except when there was something in her own line that needed foresight,such as buying linen or saucepans,she wasn't really capable of thinking beyond tomorrow's meals.The shop was giving trouble and Father was worried—that was about as far as she saw into it.None of us had any grasp of what was happening.Father had had a bad year and lost money,but was he really frightened by the future?I don't think so.This was 1909,remember.He didn't know what was happening to him,he wasn't capable of foreseeing that these Sarazin people would systematically under-sell him,ruin him,and eat him up.How could he?Things hadn't happened like that when he was a young man.All he knew was that times were bad,trade was very'slack',very'slow'(he kept repeating these phrases),but probably things would'look up presently'.

It would be nice if I could tell you that I was a great help to my father in his time of trouble,suddenly proved myself a man,and developed qualities which no one had suspected in me—and so on and so forth,like the stuff you used to read in the uplift novels of thirty years ago.Or alternatively I'd like to be able to record that I bitterly resented having to leave school,my eager young mind,yearning for knowledge and refinement,recoiled from the

soulless mechanical job into which they were thrusting me—and so on and so forth, like the stuff you read in the uplift novels today. Both would be complete bunkum. The truth is that I was pleased and excited at the idea of going to work, especially when I grasped that Old Grimmett was going to pay me real wages, twelve shillings a week, of which I could keep four for myself. The big carp at Binfield House, which had filled my mind for three days past, faded right out of it. I'd no objection to leaving school a few terms early. It generally happened the same way with boys at our school. A boy was always going to go to Reading University, or study to be an engineer, or go into business in London, or run away to sea—and then suddenly, at two days' notice, he'd disappear from school, and a fortnight later you'd meet him on a bicycle, delivering vegetables. Within five minutes of Father telling me that I should have to leave school I was wondering about the new suit I should wear to go to work in. I instantly started demanding a grown-up suit, with a kind of coat that was fashionable at that time, a cutaway, I think it was called. Of course both Mother and Father were scandalised and said they'd never heard of such a thing. For some reason that I've never fully fathomed, parents in those days always tried to prevent their children wearing grown-up clothes as long as possible. In every family there was a stand-up fight before a boy had his first tall collars or a girl put her hair up.

So the conversation veered away from Father's business troubles and degenerated into a long, nagging kind of argument, with Father gradually getting angry and repeating over and over—dropping an aitch now and again, as he was apt to do when he got angry—'Well, you can't have it. Make up your mind to that—you can't have it.' so I didn't have my cutaway, but went to work for the first time in a ready-made black suit and a broad collar in which I looked an overgrown lout. Any distress I felt over the whole business

really arose from that. Joe was even more selfish about it. He was furious at having to leave the bicycle shop, and for the short time that he remained at home he merely loafed about, made a nuisance of himself and was no help to Father whatever.

I worked in old Grimmett's shop for nearly six years. Grimmett was a fine, upstanding, white-whiskered old chap, like a rather stouter version of Uncle Ezekiel, and like Uncle Ezekiel a good Liberal. But he was less of a firebrand and more respected in the town. He'd trimmed his sails during the Boer War, he was a bitter enemy of trade unions and once sacked an assistant for possessing a photograph of Keir Hardie, and he was 'chapel'—in fact he was a big noise, literally, in the Baptist Chapel, known locally as the Tin Tab—whereas my family were 'church' and Uncle Ezekiel was an infidel at that. Old Grimmett was a town councillor and an official of the local Liberal Party. With his white whiskers, his canting talk about liberty of conscience and the Grand Old Man, his thumping bank balance, and the extempore prayers you could sometimes hear him letting loose when you passed the Tin Tab, he was a little like a legendary nonconformist grocer in the story—you've heard it, I expect:

'James!'

'Yessir?'

'Have you sanded the sugar?'

'Yessir!'

'Have you watered the treacle?'

'Yessir!'

'Then come up to prayers.'

God knows how often I heard that story whispered in the shop. We did actually start the day with a prayer before we put up the shutters. Not that old Grimmett sanded the sugar. He knew that that doesn't pay. But he was a sharp man in business, he did all the high-class grocery trade of Lower Binfield and the country round, and he had three assistants in the shop besides the errand-boy, the van-man, and his own daughter (he was a widower) who acted as cashier. I was the errand-boy for my first six months. Then one of the assistants left to set up in Reading and I moved into the shop and wore my first white apron. I learned to tie a parcel, pack a bag of currants, grind coffee, work the bacon-slicer, carve ham, put an edge on a knife, sweep the floor, dust eggs without breaking them, pass off an inferior article as a good one, clean a window, judge a pound of cheese by eye, open a packing-case, whack a slab of butter into shape, and—what was a good deal the hardest—remember where the stock was kept. I haven't such detailed memories of grocering as I have of fishing, but I remember a good deal. To this day I know the trick of snapping a bit of string in my fingers. If you put me in front of a bacon-slicer I could work it better than I can a typewriter. I could spin you some pretty fair technicalities about grades of China tea and what margarine is made of and the average weight of eggs and the price of paper bags per thousand.

Well, for more than five years that was me—an alert young chap with a round, pink, snubby kind of face and butter-coloured hair (no longer cut short but carefully greased and slicked back in what people used to call a 'smarm'), hustling about behind the counter in a white apron with a pencil behind my ear, tying up bags of coffee like lightning and jockeying the customer along with 'Yes, ma'am! Certainly, ma'am! AND the next order, ma'am!' in a voice with just a trace of a Cockney accent. Old Grimmett worked us

pretty hard,it was an eleven-hour day except on Thursdays and Sundays,and Christmas week was a nightmare.Yet it's a good time to look back on.Don't think that I had no ambitions.I knew I wasn't going to remain a grocer's assistant for ever,I was merely'learning the trade'.Some time,somehow or other,there'd be enough money for me to'set up'on my own.That was how people felt in those days.This was before the war,remember,and before the slumps and before the dole.The world was big enough for everyone.Anyone could'set up in trade',there was always room for another shop.And time was slipping on.1909,1910,1911.King Edward died and the papers came out with a black border round the edge.Two cinemas opened in Walton.The cars got commoner on the roads and cross-country motor-buses began to run.An aeroplane—a flimsy,rickety-looking thing with a chap sitting in the middle on a kind of chair—flew over Lower Binfield and the whole town rushed out of their houses to yell at it.People began to say rather vaguely that this here German Emperor was getting too big for his boots and'it'(meaning war with Germany)was'coming some time'.My wages went gradually up,until finally,just before the war,they were twenty-eight shillings a week.I paid Mother ten shillings a week for my board,and later,when times got worse,fifteen shillings,and even that left me feeling richer than I've felt since.I grew another inch,my moustache began to sprout,I wore button boots and collars three inches high.In church on Sundays,in my natty dark grey suit,with my bowler hat and black dogskin gloves on the pew beside me,I looked the perfect gent,so that Mother could hardly contain her pride in me.In between work and'walking out'on Thursdays,and thinking about clothes and girls,I had fits of ambition and saw myself developing into a Big Business Man like Lever or William Whiteley.Between sixteen and eighteen I made serious efforts to'improve my mind'and train myself for a business career.I cured myself of dropping aitches and got rid of most of my Cockney

accent.(In the Thames Valley the country accents were going out.Except for the farm lads,nearly everyone who was born later than 1890 talked Cockney.)I did a correspondence course with Littleburns'Commercial Academy,learnt bookkeeping and business English,read solemnly through a book of frightful blah called The Art of Salesmanship,and improved my arithmetic and even my handwriting.When I was as old as seventeen I've sat up late at night with my tongue hanging out of my mouth,practising copperplate by the little oil-lamp on the bedroom table.At times I read enormously,generally crime and adventure stories,and sometimes paper-covered books which were furtively passed round by the chaps at the shop and described as'hot'.(They were translations of Maupassant and Paul de Kock.)But when I was eighteen I suddenly turned highbrow,got a ticket for the County Library,and began to stodge through books by Marie Corelli and Hall Caine and Anthony Hope.It was at about that time that I joined the Lower Binfield Reading Circle,which was run by the vicar and met one evening a week all through the winter for what was called'literary discussion'.Under pressure from the vicar I read bits of Sesame and Lilies and even had a go at Browning.

And time was slipping away.1910,1911,1912.And Father's business was going down—not slumping suddenly into the gutter,but it was going down.Neither Father nor Mother was ever quite the same after Joe ran away from home.This happened not long after I went to work at Grimmett's.

Joe,at eighteen,had grown into an ugly ruffian.He was a hefty chap,much bigger than the rest of the family,with tremendous shoulders,a big head,and a sulky,lowering kind of face on which he already had a respectable moustache.When he wasn't in the tap-room of the George he was loafing in the shop doorway,with his hands dug deep into his pockets,scowling at the people who

passed,except when they happened to be girls,as though he'd like to knock them down.If anyone came into the shop he'd move aside just enough to let them pass,and,without taking his hands out of his pockets,yell over his shoulders'Da-ad!Shop!'This was as near as he ever got to helping.Father and Mother said despairingly that they'didn't know what to do with him',and he was costing the devil of a lot with his drinking and endless smoking.Late one night he walked out of the house and was never heard of again.He'd prised open the till and taken all the money that was in it,luckily not much,about eight pounds.That was enough to get him a steerage passage to America.He'd always wanted to go to America,and I think he probably did so,though we never knew for certain.It made a bit of a scandal in the town.The official theory was that Joe had bolted because he'd put a girl in the family way.There was a girl named Sally Chivers who lived in the same street as the Simmonses and was going to have a baby,and Joe had certainly been with her,but so had about a dozen others,and nobody knew whose baby it was.Mother and Father accepted the baby theory and even,in private,used it to excuse their'poor boy'for stealing the eight pounds and running away.They weren't capable of grasping that Joe had cleared out because he couldn't stand a decent respectable life in a little country town and wanted a life of loafing,fights,and women.We never heard of him again.Perhaps he went utterly to the bad,perhaps he was killed in the war,perhaps he merely didn't bother to write.Luckily the baby was born dead,so there were no complications.As for the fact that Joe had stolen the eight pounds,Mother and Father managed to keep it a secret till they died.In their eyes it was a much worse disgrace than Sally Chivers's baby.

The trouble over Joe aged Father a great deal.To lose Joe was merely to cut a loss,but it hurt him and made him ashamed.From

that time forward his moustache was much greyer and he seemed to have grown a lot smaller.Perhaps my memory of him as a little grey man,with a round,lined,anxious face and dusty spectacles,really dates from that time.By slow degrees he was getting more and more involved in money worries and less and less interested in other things.He talked less about politics and the Sunday papers,and more about the badness of trade.Mother seemed to have shrunk a little,too.In my childhood I'd known her as something vast and overflowing,with her yellow hair and her beaming face and her enormous bosom,a sort of great opulent creature like the figure-head of a battleship.Now she'd got smaller and more anxious and older than her years.She was less lordly in the kitchen,went in more for neck of mutton,worried over the price of coal,and began to use margarine,a thing which in the old days she'd never have allowed into the house.After Joe had gone Father had to hire an errand-boy again,but from then on he employed very young boys whom he only kept for a year or two and who couldn't lift heavy weights.I sometimes lent him a hand when I was at home.I was too selfish to do it regularly.I can still see him working his way slowly across the yard,bent double and almost hidden under an enormous sack,like a snail under its shell.The huge,monstrous sack,weighing a hundred and fifty pounds,I suppose,pressing his neck and shoulders almost to the ground,and the anxious,spectacled face looking up from underneath it.In 1911 he ruptured himself and had to spend weeks in hospital and hire a temporary manager for the shop,which ate another hole in his capital.A small shopkeeper going down the hill is a dreadful thing to watch,but it isn't sudden and obvious like the fate of a working man who gets the sack and promptly finds himself on the dole.It's just a gradual chipping away of trade,with little ups and downs,a few shillings to the bad here,a few sixpences to the good there.Somebody who's dealt with you for years suddenly deserts and goes to Sarazins'.Somebody else buys a dozen hens and

gives you a weekly order for corn.You can still keep going.You're still'your own master',always a little more worried and a little shabbier,with your capital shrinking all the time.You can go on like that for years,for a lifetime if you're lucky.Uncle Ezekiel died in 1911,leaving 120 pounds which must have made a lot of difference to Father.It wasn't till 1913 that he had to mortgage his life-insurance policy.That I didn't hear about at the time,or I'd have understood what it meant.As it was I don't think I ever got further than realising that Father'wasn't doing well',trade was'slack',there'd be a bit longer to wait before I had the money to'set up'.Like Father himself,I looked on the shop as something permanent,and I was a bit inclined to be angry with him for not managing things better.I wasn't capable of seeing,and neither was he nor anyone else,that he was being slowly ruined,that his business would never pick up again and if he lived to be seventy he'd certainly end in the workhouse.Many a time I've passed Sarazins'shop in the market-place and merely thought how much I preferred their slick window-front to Father's dusty old shop,with the'S.Bowling'which you could hardly read,the chipped white lettering,and the faded packets of bird-seed.It didn't occur to me that Sarazins'were tapeworms who were eating him alive.Sometimes I used to repeat to him some of the stuff I'd been reading in my correspondence-course textbooks,about salesmanship and modern methods.He never paid much attention.He'd inherited an old-established business,he'd always worked hard,done a fair trade,and supplied sound goods,and things would look up presently.It's a fact that very few shopkeepers in those days actually ended in the workhouse.With any luck you died with a few pounds still your own.It was a race between death and bankruptcy,and,thank God,death got Father first,and Mother too.

1911,1912,1913.I tell you it was a good time to be alive.It was

late in 1912,through the vicar's Reading Circle,that I first met Elsie Waters.Till then,although,like all the rest of the boys in the town,I'd gone out looking for girls and occasionally managed to connect up with this girl or that and'walk out'a few Sunday afternoons,I'd never really had a girl of my own.It's a queer business,that chasing of girls when you're about sixteen.At some recognised part of the town the boys stroll up and down in pairs,watching the girls,and the girls stroll up and down in pairs,pretending not to notice the boys,and presently some kind of contact is established and instead of twos they're trailing along in fours,all four utterly speechless.The chief feature of those walks—and it was worse the second time,when you went out with the girl alone—was the ghastly failure to make any kind of conversation.But Elsie Waters seemed different.The truth was that I was growing up.

I don't want to tell the story of myself and Elsie Waters,even if there was any story to tell.It's merely that she's part of the picture,part of'before the war'.Before the war it was always summer—a delusion,as I've remarked before,but that's how I remember it.the white dusty road stretching out between the chestnut trees,the smell of night-stocks,the green pools under the willows,the splash of Burford Weir—that's what I see when I shut my eyes and think of'before the war',and towards the end Elsie Waters is part of it.

I don't know whether Elsie would be considered pretty now.She was then.She was tall for a girl,about as tall as I am,with pale gold,heavy kind of hair which she wore somehow plaited and coiled round her head,and a delicate,curiously gentle face.She was one of those girls that always look their best in black,especially the very plain black dresses they made them wear in the drapery—she worked at Lilywhite's,the draper's,though she came originally from London.I suppose she would have been two years older than I was.

I'm grateful to Elsie,because she was the first person who taught me to care about a woman.I don't mean women in general,I mean an individual woman.I'd met her at the Reading Circle and hardly noticed her,and then one day I went into Lilywhite's during working hours,a thing I wouldn't normally have been able to do,but as it happened we'd run out of butter muslin and old Grimmitt sent me to buy some.You know the atmosphere of a draper's shop.It's something peculiarly feminine.There's a hushed feeling,a subdued light,a cool smell of cloth,and a faint whirring from the wooden balls of change rolling to and fro.Elsie was leaning against the counter,cutting off a length of cloth with the big scissors.There was something about her black dress and the curve of her breast against the counter—I can't describe it,something curiously soft,curiously feminine.As soon as you saw her you knew that you could take her in your arms and do what you wanted with her.She was really deeply feminine,very gentle,very submissive,the kind that would always do what a man told her,though she wasn't either small or weak.She wasn't even stupid,only rather silent and,at times,dreadfully refined.But in those days I was rather refined myself.

We were living together for about a year.Of course in a town like Lower Binfield you could only live together in a figurative sense.Officially we were'walking out',which was a recognised custom and not quite the same as being engaged.There was a road that branched off from the road to Upper Binfield and ran along under the edge of the hills.There was a long stretch of it,nearly a mile,that was quite straight and fringed with enormous horse-chestnut trees,and on the grass at the side there was a footpath under the boughs that was known as Lovers' Lane.We used to go there on the May evenings,when the chestnuts were in blossom.Then the short nights came on,and it was light for hours

after we'd left the shop.You know the feeling of a June evening.The kind of blue twilight that goes on and on,and the air brushing against your face like silk.Sometimes on Sunday afternoons we went over Chamford Hill and down to the water-meadows along the Thames.1913!My God!1913!The stillness,the green water,the rushing of the weir!It'll never come again.I don't mean that 1913 will never come again.I mean the feeling inside you,the feeling of not being in a hurry and not being frightened,the feeling you've either had and don't need to be told about,or haven't had and won't ever have the chance to learn.

It wasn't till late summer that we began what's called living together.I'd been too shy and clumsy to begin,and too ignorant to realise that there'd been others before me.One Sunday afternoon we went into the beech woods round Upper Binfield.Up there you could always be alone.I wanted her very badly,and I knew quite well that she was only waiting for me to begin.Something,I don't know what,put it into my head to go into the grounds of Binfield House.Old Hodges,who was past seventy and getting very crusty,was capable of turning us out,but he'd probably be asleep on a Sunday afternoon.We slipped through a gap in the fence and down the footpath between the beeches to the big pool.It was four years or more since I'd been that way.Nothing had changed.Still the utter solitude,the hidden feeling with the great trees all round you,the old boat-house rotting among the bulrushes.We lay down in the little grass hollow beside the wild peppermint,and we were as much alone as if we'd been in Central Africa.I'd kissed her God knows how many times,and then I'd got up and was wandering about again.I wanted her very badly,and wanted to take the plunge,only I was half-frightened.And curiously enough there was another thought in my mind at the same time.It suddenly struck me that for years I'd meant to come back here and had never come.Now

I was so near, it seemed a pity not to go down to the other pool and have a look at the big carp. I felt I'd kick myself afterwards if I missed the chance, in fact I couldn't think why I hadn't been back before. The carp were stored away in my mind, nobody knew about them except me, I was going to catch them some time. Practically they were MY carp. I actually started wandering along the bank in that direction, and then when I'd gone about ten yards I turned back. It meant crashing your way through a kind of jungle of brambles and rotten brushwood, and I was dressed up in my Sunday best. Dark-grey suit, bowler hat, button boots, and a collar that almost cut my ears off. That was how people dressed for Sunday afternoon walks in those days. And I wanted Elsie very badly. I went back and stood over her for a moment. She was lying on the grass with her arm over her face, and she didn't stir when she heard me come. In her black dress she looked—I don't know how, kind of soft, kind of yielding, as though her body was a kind of malleable stuff that you could do what you liked with. She was mine and I could have her, this minute if I wanted to. Suddenly I stopped being frightened, I chucked my hat on to the grass (it bounced, I remember), knelt down, and took hold of her. I can smell the wild peppermint yet. It was my first time, but it wasn't hers, and we didn't make such a mess of it as you might expect. So that was that. The big carp faded out of my mind again, and in fact for years afterwards I hardly thought about them.

1913. 1914. The spring of 1914. First the blackthorn, then the hawthorn, then the chestnuts in blossom. Sunday afternoons along the towpath, and the wind rippling the beds of rushes so that they swayed all together in great thick masses and looked somehow like a woman's hair. The endless June evenings, the path under the chestnut trees, an owl hooting somewhere and Elsie's body against me. It was a hot July that year. How we sweated in the shop, and

how the cheese and the ground coffee smelt!And then the cool of the evening outside,the smell of night-stocks and pipe-tobacco in the lane behind the allotments,the soft dust underfoot,and the nightjars hawking after the cockchafers.

Christ!What's the use of saying that one oughtn't to be sentimental about'before the war'?I AM sentimental about it.So are you if you remember it.It's quite true that if you look back on any special period of time you tend to remember the pleasant bits.That's true even of the war.But it's also true that people then had something that we haven't got now.

What?It was simply that they didn't think of the future as something to be terrified of.It isn't that life was softer then than now.Actually it was harsher.People on the whole worked harder,lived less comfortably,and died more painfully.The farm hands worked frightful hours for fourteen shillings a week and ended up as worn-out cripples with a five-shilling old-age pension and an occasional half-crown from the parish.And what was called'respectable'poverty was even worse.When little Watson,a small draper at the other end of the High Street,'failed'after years of struggling,his personal assets were£2 9s.6d.,and he died almost immediately of what was called'gastric trouble',but the doctor let it out that it was starvation.Yet he'd clung to his frock coat to the last.Old Crimp,the watchmaker's assistant,a skilled workman who'd been at the job,man and boy,for fifty years,got cataract and had to go into the workhouse.His grandchildren were howling in the street when they took him away.His wife went out charing,and by desperate efforts managed to send him a shilling a week for pocket-money.You saw ghastly things happening sometimes.Small businesses sliding down the hill,solid tradesmen turning gradually into broken-down bankrupts,people dying by inches of cancer and liver disease,drunken husbands signing the pledge every Monday

and breaking it every Saturday, girls ruined for life by an illegitimate baby. The houses had no bathrooms, you broke the ice in your basin on winter mornings, the back streets stank like the devil in hot weather, and the churchyard was bang in the middle of the town, so that you never went a day without remembering how you'd got to end. And yet what was it that people had in those days? A feeling of security, even when they weren't secure. More exactly, it was a feeling of continuity. All of them knew they'd got to die, and I suppose a few of them knew they were going to go bankrupt, but what they didn't know was that the order of things could change. Whatever might happen to themselves, things would go on as they'd known them. I don't believe it made very much difference that what's called religious belief was still prevalent in those days. It's true that nearly everyone went to church, at any rate in the country—Elsie and I still went to church as a matter of course, even when we were living in what the vicar would have called sin—and if you asked people whether they believed in a life after death they generally answered that they did. But I've never met anyone who gave me the impression of really believing in a future life. I think that, at most, people believe in that kind of thing in the same way as kids believe in Father Christmas. But it's precisely in a settled period, a period when civilisation seems to stand on its four legs like an elephant, that such things as a future life don't matter. It's easy enough to die if the things you care about are going to survive. You've had your life, you're getting tired, it's time to go underground—that's how people used to see it. Individually they were finished, but their way of life would continue. Their good and evil would remain good and evil. They didn't feel the ground they stood on shifting under their feet.

Father was failing, and he didn't know it. It was merely that times were very bad, trade seemed to dwindle and dwindle, his bills

were harder and harder to meet. Thank God, he never even knew that he was ruined, never actually went bankrupt, because he died very suddenly (it was influenza that turned into pneumonia) at the beginning of 1915. To the end he believed that with thrift, hard work, and fair dealing a man can't go wrong. There must have been plenty of small shopkeepers who carried that belief not merely on to bankrupt deathbeds but even into the workhouse. Even Lovegrove the saddler, with cars and motor-vans staring him in the face, didn't realise that he was as out of date as the rhinoceros. And Mother too — Mother never lived to know that the life she'd been brought up to, the life of a decent God-fearing shopkeeper's daughter and a decent God-fearing shopkeeper's wife in the reign of good Queen Vic, was finished for ever. Times were difficult and trade was bad, Father was worried and this and that was 'aggravating', but you carried on much the same as usual. The old English order of life couldn't change. For ever and ever decent God-fearing women would cook Yorkshire pudding and apple dumplings on enormous coal ranges, wear woollen underclothes and sleep on feathers, make plum jam in July and pickles in October, and read Hilda's Home Companion in the afternoons, with the flies buzzing round, in a sort of cosy little underworld of stewed tea, bad legs, and happy endings. I don't say that either Father or Mother was quite the same to the end. They were a bit shaken, and sometimes a little dispirited. But at least they never lived to know that everything they'd believed in was just so much junk. They lived at the end of an epoch, when everything was dissolving into a sort of ghastly flux, and they didn't know it. They thought it was eternity. You couldn't blame them. That was what it felt like.

Then came the end of July, and even Lower Binfield grasped that things were happening. For days there was tremendous vague excitement and endless leading articles in the papers, which Father

actually brought in from the shop to read aloud to Mother. And then suddenly the posters everywhere:

GERMAN ULTIMATUM.FRANCE MOBILISING

For several days(four days,wasn't it?I forget the exact dates)there was a strange stifled feeling,a kind of waiting hush,like the moment before a thunderstorm breaks,as though the whole of England was silent and listening.It was very hot,I remember.In the shop it was as though we couldn't work,though already everyone in the neighbourhood who had five bob to spare was rushing in to buy quantities of tinned stuff and flour and oatmeal.It was as if we were too feverish to work,we only sweated and waited.In the evenings people went down to the railway station and fought like devils over the evening papers which arrived on the London train.And then one afternoon a boy came rushing down the High Street with an armful of papers,and people were coming into their doorways to shout across the street.Everyone was shouting'We've come in!We've come in!'The boy grabbed a poster from his bundle and stuck it on the shop-front opposite:

ENGLAND DECLARES WAR ON GERMANY

We rushed out on to the pavement,all three assistants,and cheered.Everybody was cheering.Yes,cheering.But old Grimmitt,though he'd already done pretty well out of the war-scare,still held on to a little of his Liberal principles,'didn't hold'with the war,and said it would be a bad business.

Two months later I was in the Army.Seven months later I was in France.

I wasn't wounded till late in 1916.

We'd just come out of the trenches and were marching over a bit of road a mile or so back which was supposed to be safe, but which the Germans must have got the range of some time earlier. Suddenly they started putting a few shells over—it was heavy H.E. stuff, and they were only firing about one a minute. There was the usual zwee-e-e-e! and then BOOM! in a field somewhere over to the right. I think it was the third shell that got me. I knew as soon as I heard it coming that it had my name written on it. They say you always know. It didn't say what an ordinary shell says. It said 'I'm after you, you b—YOU, you b—YOU!'—all this in the space of about three seconds. And the last you was the explosion.

I felt as if an enormous hand made of air were sweeping me along. And presently I came down with a sort of burst, shattered feeling among a lot of old tin cans, splinters of wood, rusty barbed wire, turds, empty cartridge cases, and other muck in the ditch at the side of the road. When they'd hauled me out and cleaned some of the dirt off me they found that I wasn't very badly hurt. It was only a lot of small shell-splinters that had lodged in one side of my bottom and down the backs of my legs. But luckily I'd broken a rib in falling, which made it just bad enough to get me back to England. I spent that winter in a hospital camp on the downs near Eastbourne.

Do you remember those war-time hospital camps? The long rows of wooden huts like chicken-houses stuck right on top of those beastly icy downs—the 'south coast', people used to call it, which made me wonder what the north coast could be like—where the wind seems to blow at you from all directions at once. And the droves of blokes in their pale-blue flannel suits and red ties, wandering up and down looking for a place out of the wind and never finding one. Sometimes the kids from the slap-up boys' schools

in Eastbourne used to be led round in crocodiles to hand out fags and peppermint creams to the 'wounded Tommies', as they called us. A pink-faced kid of about eight would walk up to a knot of wounded men sitting on the grass, split open a packet of Woodbines and solemnly hand one fag to each man, just like feeding the monkeys at the zoo. Anyone who was strong enough used to wander for miles over the downs in hopes of meeting girls. There were never enough girls to go round. In the valley below the camp there was a bit of a spinney, and long before dusk you'd see a couple glued against every tree, and sometimes, if it happened to be a thick tree, one on each side of it. My chief memory of that time is sitting against a gorse-bush in the freezing wind, with my fingers so cold I couldn't bend them and the taste of a peppermint cream in my mouth. That's a typical soldier's memory. But I was getting away from a Tommy's life, all the same. The C.O. had sent my name in for a commission a little before I was wounded. By this time they were desperate for officers and anyone who wasn't actually illiterate could have a commission if he wanted one. I went straight from the hospital to an officers' training camp near Colchester.

It's very strange, the things the war did to people. It was less than three years since I'd been a spry young shop-assistant, bending over the counter in my white apron with 'Yes, madam! Certainly, madam! AND the next order, madam?' with a grocer's life ahead of me and about as much notion of becoming an Army officer as of getting a knighthood. And here I was already, swaggering about in a gorblimey hat and a yellow collar and more or less keeping my end up among a crowd of other temporary gents and some who weren't even temporary. And—this is really the point—not feeling it in any way strange. Nothing seemed strange in those days.

It was like an enormous machine that had got hold of you. You'd no sense of acting of your own free will, and at the same

time no notion of trying to resist.If people didn't have some such feeling as that,no war could last three months.The armies would just pack up and go home.Why had I joined the Army?Or the million other idiots who joined up before conscription came in? Partly for a lark and partly because of England my England and Britons never never and all that stuff.But how long did that last? Most of the chaps I knew had forgotten all about it long before they got as far as France.The men in the trenches weren't patriotic,didn't hate the Kaiser,didn't care a damn about gallant little Belgium and the Germans raping nuns on tables(it was always'on tables',as though that made it worse)in the streets of Brussels.On the other hand it didn't occur to them to try and escape.The machine had got hold of you and it could do what it liked with you.It lifted you up and dumped you down among places and things you'd never dreamed of,and if it had dumped you down on the surface of the moon it wouldn't have seemed particularly strange.The day I joined the Army the old life was finished.It was as though it didn't concern me any longer.I wonder if you'd believe that from that day forward I only once went back to Lower Binfield,and that was to Mother's funeral?It sounds incredible now,but it seemed natural enough at the time.Partly,I admit,it was on account of Elsie,whom,of course,I'd stopped writing to after two or three months.No doubt she'd picked up with someone else,but I didn't want to meet her.Otherwise,perhaps,when I got a bit of leave I'd have gone down and seen Mother,who'd had fits when I joined the Army but would have been proud of a son in uniform.

Father died in 1915.I was in France at the time.I don't exaggerate when I say that Father's death hurts me more now than it did then.At the time it was just a bit of bad news which I accepted almost without interest,in the sort of empty-headed apathetic way in which one accepted everything in the trenches.I

remember crawling into the doorway of the dugout to get enough light to read the letter, and I remember Mother's tear-stains on the letter, and the aching feeling in my knees and the smell of mud. Father's life-insurance policy had been mortgaged for most of its value, but there was a little money in the bank and Sarazins' were going to buy up the stock and even pay some tiny amount for the good-will. Anyway, Mother had a bit over two hundred pounds, besides the furniture. She went for the time being to lodge with her cousin, the wife of a smallholder who was doing pretty well out of the war, near Doxley, a few miles the other side of Walton. It was only for the time being'. There was a temporary feeling about everything. In the old days, which as a matter of fact were barely a year old, the whole thing would have been an appalling disaster. With Father dead, the shop sold and Mother with two hundred pounds in the world, you'd have seen stretching out in front of you a kind of fifteen-act tragedy, the last act being a pauper's funeral. But now the war and the feeling of not being one's own master overshadowed everything. People hardly thought in terms of things like bankruptcy and the workhouse any longer. This was the case even with Mother, who, God knows, had only very dim notions about the war. Besides, she was already dying, though neither of us knew it.

She came across to see me in the hospital at Eastbourne. It was over two years since I'd seen her, and her appearance gave me a bit of a shock. She seemed to have faded and somehow to have shrunk. Partly it was because by this time I was grown-up, I'd travelled, and everything looked smaller to me, but there was no question that she'd got thinner, and also yellower. She talked in the old rambling way about Aunt Martha (that was the cousin she was staying with), and the changes in Lower Binfield since the war, and all the boys who'd 'gone' (meaning joined the Army), and her

indigestion which was 'aggravating', and poor Father's tombstone and what a lovely corpse he made. It was the old talk, the talk I'd listened to for years, and yet somehow it was like a ghost talking. It didn't concern me any longer. I'd known her as a great splendid protecting kind of creature, a bit like a ship's figure-head and a bit like a broody hen, and after all she was only a little old woman in a black dress. Everything was changing and fading. That was the last time I saw her alive. I got the wire saying she was seriously ill when I was at the training school at Colchester, and put in for a week's urgent leave immediately. But it was too late. She was dead by the time I got to Doxley. What she and everyone else had imagined to be indigestion was some kind of internal growth, and a sudden chill on the stomach put the final touch. The doctor tried to cheer me up by telling me that the growth was 'benevolent', which struck me as a queer thing to call it, seeing that it had killed her.

Well, we buried her next to Father, and that was my last glimpse of Lower Binfield. It had changed a lot, even in three years. Some of the shops were shut, some had different names over them. Nearly all the men I'd known as boys were gone, and some of them were dead. Sid Lovegrove was dead, killed on the Somme. Ginger Watson, the farm lad who'd belonged to the Black Hand years ago, the one who used to catch rabbits alive, was dead in Egypt. One of the chaps who'd worked with me at Grimmitt's had lost both legs. Old Lovegrove had shut up his shop and was living in a cottage near Walton on a tiny annuity. Old Grimmitt, on the other hand, was doing well out of the war and had turned patriotic and was a member of the local board which tried conscientious objectors. The thing which more than anything else gave the town an empty, forlorn kind of look was that there were practically no horses left. Every horse worth taking had been commandeered long ago. The station fly still existed, but the brute that pulled it wouldn't

have been able to stand up if it hadn't been for the shafts. For the hour or so that I was there before the funeral I wandered round the town, saying how d'you do to people and showing off my uniform. Luckily I didn't run into Elsie. I saw all the changes, and yet it was as though I didn't see them. My mind was on other things, chiefly the pleasure of being seen in my second-loot's uniform, with my black armlet (a thing which looks rather smart on khaki) and my new whipcord breeches. I distinctly remember that I was still thinking about those whipcord breeches when we stood at the graveside. And then they chucked some earth on to the coffin and I suddenly realised what it means for your mother to be lying with seven feet of earth on top of her, and something kind of twitched behind my eyes and nose, but even then the whipcord breeches weren't altogether out of my mind.

Don't think I didn't feel for Mother's death. I did. I wasn't in the trenches any longer, I could feel sorry for a death. But the thing I didn't care a damn about, didn't even grasp to be happening, was the passing-away of the old life I'd known. After the funeral, Aunt Martha, who was rather proud of having a 'real officer' for a nephew and would have made a splash of the funeral if I'd let her, went back to Doxley on the bus and I took the fly down to the station, to get the train to London and then to Colchester. We drove past the shop. No one had taken it since Father died. It was shut up and the window-pane was black with dust, and they'd burned the 'S. Bowling' off the signboard with a plumber's blowflame. Well, there was the house where I'd been a child and a boy and a young man, where I'd crawled about the kitchen floor and smelt the sainfoin and read Donovan the Dauntless, where I'd done my homework for the Grammar School, mixed bread paste, mended bicycle punctures, and tried on my first high collar. It had been as permanent to me as the Pyramids, and now it would be just an

accident if I ever set foot in it again. Father, Mother, Joe, the errand-boys, old Nailer the terrier, Spot, the one that came after Nailer, Jackie the bullfinch, the cats, the mice in the loft—all gone, nothing left but dust. And I didn't care a damn. I was sorry Mother was dead, I was even sorry Father was dead, but all the time my mind was on other things. I was a bit proud of being seen riding in a cab, a thing I hadn't yet got used to, and I was thinking of the sit of my new whipcord breeches, and my nice smooth officer's putties, so different from the gritty stuff the Tommies had to wear, and of the other chaps at Colchester and the sixty quid Mother had left and the beanos we'd have with it. Also I was thanking God that I hadn't happened to run into Elsie.

The war did extraordinary things to people. And what was more extraordinary than the way it killed people was the way it sometimes didn't kill them. It was like a great flood rushing you along to death, and suddenly it would shoot you up some backwater where you'd find yourself doing incredible and pointless things and drawing extra pay for them. There were labour battalions making roads across the desert that didn't lead anywhere, there were chaps marooned on oceanic islands to look out for German cruisers which had been sunk years earlier, there were Ministries of this and that with armies of clerks and typists which went on existing years after their function had ended, by a kind of inertia. People were shoved into meaningless jobs and then forgotten by the authorities for years on end. This was what happened to myself, or very likely I wouldn't be here. The whole sequence of events is rather interesting.

A little while after I was gazetted there was a call for officers for the A.S.C. As soon as the O.C. of the training camp heard that I knew something about the grocery trade (I didn't let on that I'd actually been behind the counter) he told me to send my name in. That went through all right, and I was just about to leave for

another training-school for A.S.C.officers somewhere in the Midlands when there was a demand for a young officer,with knowledge of the grocery trade,to act as some kind of secretary to Sir Joseph Cheam,who was a big noise in the A.S.C.God knows why they picked me out,but at any rate they did so.I've since thought that they probably mixed my name up with somebody else's.Three days later I was saluting in Sir Joseph's office.He was a lean,upright,rather handsome old boy with grizzled hair and a grave-looking nose which immediately impressed me.He looked the perfect professional soldier,the K.C.M.G.,D.S.O.with bar type,and might have been twin brother to the chap in the De Reszke advert,though in private life he was chairman of one of the big chain groceries and famous all over the world for something called the Cheam Wage-Cut System.He stopped writing as I came in and looked me over.

'You a gentleman?'

'No,sir.'

'Good.Then perhaps we'll get some work done.'

In about three minutes he'd wormed out of me that I had no secretarial experience,didn't know shorthand,couldn't use a typewriter,and had worked in a grocery at twenty-eight shillings a week.However,he said that I'd do,there were too many gentlemen in this damned Army and he'd been looking for somebody who could count beyond ten.I liked him and looked forward to working for him,but just at this moment the mysterious powers that seemed to be running the war drove us apart again.Something called the West Coast Defence Force was being formed,or rather was being talked about,and there was some vague idea of establishing dumps of rations and other stores at various points along the coast.Sir Joseph

was supposed to be responsible for the dumps in the south-west corner of England. The day after I joined his office he sent me down to check over the stores at a place called Twelve Mile Dump, on the North Cornish Coast. Or rather my job was to find out whether any stores existed. Nobody seemed certain about this. I'd just got there and discovered that the stores consisted of eleven tins of bully beef when a wire arrived from the War Office telling me to take charge of the stores at Twelve Mile Dump and remain there till further notice. I wired back 'No stores at Twelve Mile Dump.' too late. Next day came the official letter informing me that I was O.C. Twelve Mile Dump. And that's really the end of the story. I remained O.C. Twelve Mile Dump for the rest of the war.

God knows what it was all about. It's no use asking me what the West Coast Defence Force was or what it was supposed to do. Even at that time nobody pretended to know. In any case it didn't exist. It was just a scheme that had floated through somebody's mind—following on some vague rumour of a German invasion via Ireland, I suppose—and the food dumps which were supposed to exist all along the coast were also imaginary. The whole thing had existed for about three days, like a sort of bubble, and then had been forgotten, and I'd been forgotten with it. My eleven tins of bully beef had been left behind by some officers who had been there earlier on some other mysterious mission. They'd also left behind a very deaf old man called Private Lidgebird. What Lidgebird was supposed to be doing there I never discovered. I wonder whether you'll believe that I remained guarding those eleven tins of bully beef from half-way through 1917 to the beginning of 1919? Probably you won't, but it's the truth. And at the time even that didn't seem particularly strange. By 1918 one had simply got out of the habit of expecting things to happen in a reasonable manner.

Once a month they sent me an enormous official form calling

upon me to state the number and condition of pick-axes,entrenching tools,coils of barbed wire,blankets,waterproof groundsheets,first-aid outfits,sheets of corrugated iron,and tins of plum and apple jam under my care.I just entered'nil'against everything and sent the form back.Nothing ever happened.Up in London someone was quietly filing the forms,and sending out more forms,and filing those,and so on.It was the way things were happening.The mysterious higher-ups who were running the war had forgotten my existence.I didn't jog their memory.I was up a backwater that didn't lead anywhere,and after two years in France I wasn't so burning with patriotism that I wanted to get out of it.

It was a lonely part of the coast where you never saw a soul except a few yokels who'd barely heard there was a war on.A quarter of a mile away,down a little hill,the sea boomed and surged over enormous flats of sand.Nine months of the year it rained,and the other three a raging wind blew off the Atlantic.There was nothing there except Private Lidgebird,myself,two Army huts—one of them a decentish two-roomed hut which I inhabited—and the eleven tins of bully beef.Lidgebird was a surly old devil and I could never get much out of him except the fact that he'd been a market gardener before he joined the Army.It was interesting to see how rapidly he was reverting to type.Even before I got to Twelve Mile Dump he'd dug a patch round one of the huts and started planting spuds,in the autumn he dug another patch till he'd got about half an acre under cultivation,at the beginning of 1918 he started keeping hens which had got to quite a number by the end of the summer,and towards the end of the year he suddenly produced a pig from God knows where.I don't think it crossed his mind to wonder what the devil we were doing there,or what the West Coast Defence Force was and whether it actually existed.It wouldn't surprise me to hear that he's there still,raising pigs and potatoes on

the spot where Twelve Mile Dump used to be.I hope he is.Good luck to him.

Meanwhile I was doing something I'd never before had the chance to do as a full-time job—reading.

The officers who'd been there before had left a few books behind,mostly sevenpenny editions and nearly all of them the kind of tripe that people were reading in those days.Ian Hay and Sapper and the Craig Kennedy stories and so forth.But at some time or other somebody had been there who knew what books are worth reading and what are not.I myself,at the time,didn't know anything of the kind.The only books I'd ever voluntarily read were detective stories and once in a way a smutty sex book.God knows I don't set up to be a highbrow even now,but if you'd asked me THEN for the name of a'good'book I'd have answered The Woman Thou Gavest Me,or(in memory of the vicar)Sesame and Lilies.In any case a'good'book was a book one didn't have any intention of reading.But there I was,in a job where there was less than nothing to do,with the sea booming on the beach and the rain streaming down the window-panes—and a whole row of books staring me in the face on the temporary shelf someone had rigged up against the wall of the hut.Naturally I started to read them from end to end,with,at the beginning,about as much attempt to discriminate as a pig working its way through a pail of garbage.

But in among them there were three or four books that were different from the others.No,you've got it wrong!Don't run away with the idea that I suddenly discovered Marcel Proust or Henry James or somebody.I wouldn't have read them even if I had.These books I'm speaking of weren't in the least highbrow.But now and again it so happens that you strike a book which is exactly at the mental level you've reached at the moment,so much so that it seems

to have been written especially for you. One of them was H.G. Wells's *The History of Mr. Polly*, in a cheap shilling edition which was falling to pieces. I wonder if you can imagine the effect it had upon me, to be brought up as I'd been brought up, the son of a shopkeeper in a country town, and then to come across a book like that? Another was Compton Mackenzie's *Sinister Street*. It had been the scandal of the season a few years back, and I'd even heard vague rumours of it in Lower Binfield. Another was Conrad's *Victory*, parts of which bored me. But books like that started you thinking. And there was a back number of some magazine with a blue cover which had a short story of D.H. Lawrence's in it. I don't remember the name of it. It was a story about a German conscript who shoves his sergeant-major over the edge of a fortification and then does a bunk and gets caught in his girl's bedroom. It puzzled me a lot. I couldn't make out what it was all about, and yet it left me with a vague feeling that I'd like to read some others like it.

Well, for several months I had an appetite for books that was almost like physical thirst. It was the first real go-in at reading that I'd had since my Dick Donovan days. At the beginning I had no idea how to set about getting hold of books. I thought the only way was to buy them. That's interesting, I think. It shows you the difference upbringing makes. I suppose the children of the middle classes, the 500 pounds a year middle classes, know all about Mudie's and the Times Book Club when they're in their cradles. A bit later I learned of the existence of lending libraries and took out a subscription at Mudie's and another at a library in Bristol. And what I read during the next year or so! Wells, Conrad, Kipling, Galsworthy, Barry Pain, W. W. Jacobs, Pett Ridge, Oliver Onions, Compton Mackenzie, H. Seton Merriman, Maurice Baring, Stephen McKenna, May Sinclair, Arnold Bennett, Anthony Hope, Elinor Glyn, O. Henry, Stephen Leacock, and even Silas Hocking and Jean

Stratton Porter. How many of the names in that list are known to you, I wonder? Half the books that people took seriously in those days are forgotten now. But at the beginning I swallowed them all down like a whale that's got in among a shoal of shrimps. I just revelled in them. After a bit, of course, I grew more highbrow and began to distinguish between tripe and not-tripe. I got hold of Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* and sort of half-enjoyed it, and I got a lot of kick out of Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray* and Stevenson's *New Arabian Nights*. Wells was the author who made the biggest impression on me. I read George Moore's *Esther Waters* and liked it, and I tried several of Hardy's novels and always got stuck about half-way through. I even had a go at Ibsen, who left me with a vague impression that in Norway it's always raining.

It was queer, really. Even at the time it struck me as queer. I was a second-loot with hardly any Cockney accent left, I could already distinguish between Arnold Bennett and Elinor Glyn, and yet it was only four years since I'd been slicing cheese behind the counter in my white apron and looking forward to the days when I'd be a master-grocer. If I tot up the account, I suppose I must admit that the war did me good as well as harm. At any rate that year of reading novels was the only real education, in the sense of book-learning, that I've ever had. It did certain things to my mind. It gave me an attitude, a kind of questioning attitude, which I probably wouldn't have had if I'd gone through life in a normal sensible way. But—I wonder if you can understand this—the thing that really changed me, really made an impression on me, wasn't so much the books I read as the rotten meaninglessness of the life I was leading.

It really was unspeakably meaningless, that time in 1918. Here I was, sitting beside the stove in an Army hut, reading novels, and a few hundred miles away in France the guns were roaring and droves of wretched children, wetting their bags with fright, were

being driven into the machine-gun barrage like you'd shoot small coke into a furnace.I was one of the lucky ones.The higher-ups had taken their eye off me,and here I was in a snug little bolt-hole,drawing pay for a job that didn't exist.At times I got into a panic and made sure they'd remember about me and dig me out,but it never happened.The official forms,on gritty grey paper,came in once a month,and I filled them up and sent them back,and more forms came in,and I filled them up and sent them back,and so it went on.The whole thing had about as much sense in it as a lunatic's dream.The effect of all this,plus the books I was reading,was to leave me with a feeling of disbelief in everything.

I wasn't the only one.The war was full of loose ends and forgotten corners.By this time literally millions of people were stuck up backwaters of one kind and another.Whole armies were rotting away on fronts that people had forgotten the names of.There were huge Ministries with hordes of clerks and typists all drawing two pounds a week and upwards for piling up mounds of paper.Moreover they knew perfectly well that all they were doing was to pile up mounds of paper.Nobody believed the atrocity stories and the gallant little Belgium stuff any longer.The soldiers thought the Germans were good fellows and hated the French like poison.Every junior officer looked on the General Staff as mental defectives.A sort of wave of disbelief was moving across England,and it even got as far as Twelve Mile Dump.It would be an exaggeration to say that the war turned people into highbrows,but it did turn them into nihilists for the time being.People who in a normal way would have gone through life with about as much tendency to think for themselves as a suet pudding were turned into Bolshies just by the war.What should I be now if it hadn't been for the war?I don't know,but something different from what I am.If the war didn't happen to kill you it was bound to start you

thinking. After that unspeakable idiotic mess you couldn't go on regarding society as something eternal and unquestionable, like a pyramid. You knew it was just a balls-up.

9

The war had jerked me out of the old life I'd known, but in the queer period that came afterwards I forgot it almost completely.

I know that in a sense one never forgets anything. You remember that piece of orange-peel you saw in the gutter thirteen years ago, and that coloured poster of Torquay that you once got a glimpse of in a railway waiting-room. But I'm speaking of a different kind of memory. In a sense I remembered the old life in Lower Binfield. I remembered my fishing-rod and the smell of sainfoin and Mother behind the brown teapot and Jackie the bullfinch and the horse-trough in the market-place. But none of it was alive in my mind any longer. It was something far away, something that I'd finished with. It would never have occurred to me that some day I might want to go back to it.

It was a queer time, those years just after the war, almost queerer than the war itself, though people don't remember it so vividly. In a rather different form the sense of disbelieving in everything was stronger than ever. Millions of men had suddenly been kicked out of the Army to find that the country they'd fought for didn't want them, and Lloyd George and his pals were giving the works to any illusions that still existed. Bands of ex-service men marched up and down rattling collection boxes, masked women were singing in the streets, and chaps in officers' tunics were grinding barrel-organs. Everybody in England seemed to be scrambling for jobs, myself included. But I came off luckier than most. I got a small wound-gratuity, and what with that and the bit of money I'd put

aside during the last year of war(not having had much opportunity to spend it),I came out of the Army with no less than three hundred and fifty quid.It's rather interesting,I think,to notice my reaction.Here I was,with quite enough money to do the thing I'd been brought up to do and the thing I'd dreamed of for years—that is,start a shop.I had plenty of capital.If you bide your time and keep your eyes open you can run across quite nice little businesses for three hundred and fifty quid.And yet,if you'll believe me,the idea never occurred to me.I not only didn't make any move towards starting a shop,but it wasn't till years later,about 1925 in fact,that it even crossed my mind that I might have done so.The fact was that I'd passed right out of the shop-keeping orbit.That was what the Army did to you.It turned you into an imitation gentleman and gave you a fixed idea that there'd always be a bit of money coming from somewhere.If you'd suggested to me then,in 1919,that I ought to start a shop—a tobacco and sweet shop,say,or a general store in some god-forsaken village—I'd just have laughed.I'd worn pips on my shoulder,and my social standards had risen.At the same time I didn't share the delusion,which was pretty common among ex-officers,that I could spend the rest of my life drinking pink gin.I knew I'd got to have a job.And the job,of course,would be'in business'—just what kind of job I didn't know,but something high-up and important,something with a car and a telephone and if possible a secretary with a permanent wave.During the last year or so of war a lot of us had had visions like that.The chap who'd been a shop walker saw himself as a travelling salesman,and the chap who'd been a travelling salesman saw himself as a managing director.It was the effect of Army life,the effect of wearing pips and having a cheque-book and calling the evening meal dinner.All the while there'd been an idea floating round—and this applied to the men in the ranks as well as the officers—that when we came out of the Army there'd be jobs waiting for us that would bring in at least

as much as our Army pay. Of course, if ideas like that didn't circulate, no war would ever be fought.

Well, I didn't get that job. It seemed that nobody was anxious to pay me 2,000 pounds a year for sitting among streamlined office furniture and dictating letters to a platinum blonde. I was discovering what three-quarters of the blokes who'd been officers were discovering—that from a financial point of view we'd been better off in the Army than we were ever likely to be again. We'd suddenly changed from gentlemen holding His Majesty's commission into miserable out-of-works whom nobody wanted. My ideas soon sank from two thousand a year to three or four pounds a week. But even jobs of the three or four pounds a week kind didn't seem to exist. Every mortal job was filled already, either by men who'd been a few years too old to fight, or by boys who'd been a few months too young. The poor bastards who'd happened to be born between 1890 and 1900 were left out in the cold. And still it never occurred to me to go back to the grocering business. Probably I could have got a job as a grocer's assistant; old Grimmett, if he was still alive and in business (I wasn't in touch with Lower Binfield and didn't know), would have given me good refs. But I'd passed into a different orbit. Even if my social ideas hadn't risen, I could hardly have imagined, after what I'd seen and learned, going back to the old safe existence behind the counter. I wanted to be travelling about and pulling down the big dough. Chiefly I wanted to be a travelling salesman, which I knew would suit me.

But there were no jobs for travelling salesmen—that's to say, jobs with a salary attached. What there were, however, were on-commission jobs. That racket was just beginning on a big scale. It's a beautifully simple method of increasing your sales and advertising your stuff without taking any risks, and it always flourishes when times are bad. They keep you on a string by hinting that perhaps

there'll be a salaried job going in three months'time,and when you get fed up there's always some other poor devil ready to take over.Naturally it wasn't long before I had an on-commission job,in fact I had quite a number in rapid succession.Thank God,I never came down to peddling vacuum-cleaners,or dictionaries.But I travelled in cutlery,in soap-powder,in a line of patent corkscrews,tin-openers,and similar gadgets,and finally in a line of office accessories—paper-clips,carbon paper,typewriter ribbons,and so forth.I didn't do so badly either.I'm the type that CAN sell things on commission.I've got the temperament and I've got the manner.But I never came anywhere near making a decent living.You can't,in jobs like that—and,of course,you aren't meant to.

I had about a year of it altogether.It was a queer time.The cross-country journeys,the godless places you fetched up in,suburbs of Midland towns that you'd never hear of in a hundred normal lifetimes.The ghastly bed-and-breakfast houses where the sheets always smell faintly of slops and the fried egg at breakfast has a yolk paler than a lemon.And the other poor devils of salesmen that you're always meeting,middle-aged fathers of families in moth-eaten overcoats and bowler hats,who honestly believe that sooner or later trade will turn the corner and they'll jack their earnings up to five quid a week.And the traipsing from shop to shop,and the arguments with shopkeepers who don't want to listen,and the standing back and making yourself small when a customer comes in.Don't think that it worried me particularly.To some chaps that kind of life is torture.There are chaps who can't even walk into a shop and open their bag of samples without screwing themselves up as though they were going over the top.But I'm not like that.I'm tough,I can talk people into buying things they don't want,and even if they slam the door in my face it doesn't bother me.Selling things on commission is actually what I like doing,provided I can see my way to making a

bit of dough out of it. I don't know whether I learned much in that year, but I unlearned a good deal. It knocked the Army nonsense out of me, and it drove into the back of my head the notions that I'd picked up during the idle year when I was reading novels. I don't think I read a single book, barring detective stories, all the time I was on the road. I wasn't a highbrow any longer. I was down among the realities of modern life. And what are the realities of modern life? Well, the chief one is an everlasting, frantic struggle to sell things. With most people it takes the form of selling themselves—that's to say, getting a job and keeping it. I suppose there hasn't been a single month since the war, in any trade you care to name, in which there weren't more men than jobs. It's brought a peculiar, ghastly feeling into life. It's like on a sinking ship when there are nineteen survivors and fourteen lifebelts. But is there anything particularly modern in that, you say? Has it anything to do with the war? Well, it feels as if it had. That feeling that you've got to be everlastingly fighting and hustling, that you'll never get anything unless you grab it from somebody else, that there's always somebody after your job, the next month or the month after they'll be reducing staff and it's you that'll get the bird—THAT, I swear, didn't exist in the old life before the war.

But meanwhile I wasn't badly off. I was earning a bit and I'd still got plenty of money in the bank, nearly two hundred quid, and I wasn't frightened for the future. I knew that sooner or later I'd get a regular job. And sure enough, after about a year, by a stroke of luck it happened. I say by a stroke of luck, but the fact is that I was bound to fall on my feet. I'm not the type that starves. I'm about as likely to end up in the workhouse as to end up in the House of Lords. I'm the middling type, the type that gravitates by a kind of natural law towards the five-pound-a-week level. So long as there are any jobs at all I'll back myself to get one.

It happened when I was peddling paper-clips and typewriter ribbons.I'd just dodged into a huge block of offices in Fleet Street,a building which canvassers weren't allowed into,as a matter of fact,but I'd managed to give the lift attendant the impression that my bag of samples was merely an attache case.I was walking along one of the corridors looking for the offices of a small toothpaste firm that I'd been recommended to try,when I saw that some very big bug was coming down the corridor in the other direction.I knew immediately that it was a big bug.You know how it is with these big business men,they seem to take up more room and walk more loudly than any ordinary person,and they give off a kind of wave of money that you can feel fifty yards away.When he got nearly up to me I saw that it was Sir Joseph Cheam.He was in civvies,of course,but I had no difficulty in recognising him.I suppose he'd been there for some business conference or other.A couple of clerks,or secretaries,or something,were following after him,not actually holding up his train,because he wasn't wearing one,but you somehow felt that that was what they were doing.Of course I dodged aside instantly.But curiously enough he recognised me,though he hadn't seen me for years.To my surprise he stopped and spoke to me.

'Hullo,you!I've seen you somewhere before.What's your name? It's on the tip of my tongue.'

'Bowling,sir.Used to be in the A.S.C.'

'Of course.The boy that said he wasn't a gentleman.What are you doing here?'

I might have told him I was selling typewriter ribbons,and there perhaps the whole thing would have ended.But I had one of those sudden inspirations that you get occasionally—a feeling that I

might make something out of this if I handled it properly.I said instead:

'Well,sir,as a matter of fact I'm looking for a job.'

'A job,eh?Hm.Not so easy,nowadays.'

He looked me up and down for a second.The two train-bearers had kind of wafted themselves a little distance away.I saw his rather good-looking old face,with the heavy grey eyebrows and the intelligent nose,looking me over and realised that he'd decided to help me.It's queer,the power of these rich men.He'd been marching past me in his power and glory,with his underlings after him,and then on some whim or other he'd turned aside like an emperor suddenly chucking a coin to a beggar.

'So you want a job?What can you do?'

Again the inspiration.No use,with a bloke like this,cracking up your own merits.Stick to the truth.I said:'Nothing,sir.But I want a job as a travelling salesman.'

'Salesman?Hm.Not sure that I've got anything for you at present.Let's see.'

He pursed his lips up.For a moment,half a minute perhaps,he was thinking quite deeply.It was curious.Even at the time I realised that it was curious.This important old bloke,who was probably worth at least half a million,was actually taking thought on my behalf.I'd deflected him from his path and wasted at least three minutes of his time,all because of a chance remark I'd happened to make years earlier.I'd stuck in his memory and therefore he was willing to take the tiny bit of trouble that was needed to find me a job.I dare say the same day he gave twenty clerks the sack.Finally

he said:

'How'd you like to go into an insurance firm? Always fairly safe, you know. People have got to have insurance, same as they've got to eat.'

Of course I jumped at the idea of going into an insurance firm. Sir Joseph was interested in the Flying Salamander. God knows how many companies he was interested in. One of the underlings wafted himself forward with a scribbling-pad, and there and then, with the gold stylo out of his waistcoat pocket, Sir Joseph scribbled me a note to some higher-up in the Flying Salamander. Then I thanked him, and he marched on, and I sneaked off in the other direction, and we never saw one another again.

Well, I got the job, and, as I said earlier, the job got me. I've been with the Flying Salamander close on eighteen years. I started off in the office, but now I'm what's known as an Inspector, or, when there's reason to sound particularly impressive, a Representative. A couple of days a week I'm working in the district office, and the rest of the time I'm travelling around, interviewing clients whose names have been sent in by the local agents, making assessments on shops and other property, and now and again snapping up a few orders on my own account. I earn round about seven quid a week. And properly speaking that's the end of my story.

When I look back I realise that my active life, if I ever had one, ended when I was sixteen. Everything that really matters to me had happened before that date. But in a manner of speaking things were still happening—the war, for instance—up to the time when I got the job with the Flying Salamander. After that—well, they say that happy people have no histories, and neither do the blokes who work in insurance offices. From that day forward there was nothing

in my life that you could properly describe as an event,except that about two and a half years later,at the beginning of 23,I got married.

10

I was living in a boarding-house in Ealing.The years were rolling on,or crawling on.Lower Binfield had passed almost out of my memory.I was the usual young city worker who scoots for the 8:15 and intrigues for the other fellow's job.I was fairly well thought of in the firm and pretty satisfied with life.The post-war success dope had caught me,more or less.You remember the line of talk.Pep,punch,grit,sand.Get on or get out.There's plenty of room at the top.You can't keep a good man down.And the ads in the magazines about the chap that the boss clapped on the shoulder,and the keen-jawed executive who's pulling down the big dough and attributes his success to so and so's correspondence course.It's funny how we all swallowed it,even blokes like me to whom it hadn't the smallest application.Because I'm neither a go-getter nor a down-and-out,and I'm by nature incapable of being either.But it was the spirit of the time.Get on!Make good!If you see a man down,jump on his guts before he gets up again.Of course this was in the early twenties,when some of the effects of the war had worn off and the slump hadn't yet arrived to knock the stuffing out of us.

I had an'A'subscription at Boots and went to half-crown dances and belonged to a local tennis club.You know those tennis clubs in the genteel suburbs—little wooden pavilions and high wire-netting enclosures where young chaps in rather badly cut white flannels prance up and down,shouting'Fifteen forty!'and'Vantage all!'in voices which are a tolerable imitation of the Upper Crust.I'd learned to play tennis,didn't dance too badly,and got on well with the girls.At nearly thirty I wasn't a bad-looking chap,with my red face

and butter-coloured hair, and in those days it was still a point in your favour to have fought in the war. I never, then or at any other time, succeeded in looking like a gentleman, but on the other hand you probably wouldn't have taken me for the son of a small shopkeeper in a country town. I could keep my end up in the rather mixed society of a place like Ealing, where the office-employee class overlaps with the middling-professional class. It was at the tennis club that I first met Hilda.

At that time Hilda was twenty-four. She was a small, slim, rather timid girl, with dark hair, beautiful movements, and—because of having very large eyes—a distinct resemblance to a hare. She was one of those people who never say much, but remain on the edge of any conversation that's going on, and give the impression that they're listening. If she said anything at all, it was usually 'Oh, yes, I think so too', agreeing with whoever had spoken last. At tennis she hopped about very gracefully, and didn't play badly, but somehow had a helpless, childish air. Her surname was Vincent.

If you're married, there'll have been times when you've said to yourself 'Why the hell did I do it?' and God knows I've said it often enough about Hilda. And once again, looking at it across fifteen years, why DID I marry Hilda?

Partly, of course, because she was young and in a way very pretty. Beyond that I can only say that because she came of totally different origins from myself it was very difficult for me to get any grasp of what she was really like. I had to marry her first and find out about her afterwards, whereas if I'd married say, Elsie Waters, I'd have known what I was marrying. Hilda belonged to a class I only knew by hearsay, the poverty-stricken officer class. For generations past her family had been soldiers, sailors, clergymen, Anglo-Indian officials, and that kind of thing. They'd never had any money, but on

the other hand none of them had ever done anything that I should recognise as work.Say what you will,there's a kind of snob-appeal in that,if you belong as I do to the God-fearing shopkeeper class,the low church,and high-tea class.It wouldn't make any impression on me now,but it did then.Don't mistake what I'm saying.I don't mean that I married Hilda BECAUSE she belonged to the class I'd once served across the counter,with some notion of jockeying myself up in the social scale.It was merely that I couldn't understand her and therefore was capable of being goofy about her.And one thing I certainly didn't grasp was that the girls in these penniless middle-class families will marry anything in trousers,just to get away from home.

It wasn't long before Hilda took me home to see her family.I hadn't known till then that there was a considerable Anglo-Indian colony in Ealing.Talk about discovering a new world!It was quite a revelation to me.

Do you know these Anglo-Indian families?It's almost impossible,when you get inside these people's houses,to remember that out in the street it's England and the twentieth century.As soon as you set foot inside the front door you're in India in the eighties.You know the kind of atmosphere.The carved teak furniture,the brass trays,the dusty tiger-skulls on the wall,the Trichinopoly cigars,the red-hot pickles,the yellow photographs of chaps in sun-helmets,the Hindustani words that you're expected to know the meaning of,the everlasting anecdotes about tiger-shoots and what Smith said to Jones in Poona in'87.It's a sort of little world of their own that they've created,like a kind of cyst.To me,of course,it was all quite new and in some ways rather interesting.Old Vincent,Hilda's father,had been not only in India but also in some even more outlandish place,Borneo or Sarawak,I forget which.He was the usual type,completely bald,almost invisible behind his

moustache, and full of stories about cobras and cummerbunds and what the district collector said in '93. Hilda's mother was so colourless that she was just like one of the faded photos on the wall. There was also a son, Harold, who had some official job in Ceylon and was home on leave at the time when I first met Hilda. They had a little dark house in one of those buried backstreets that exist in Ealing. It smelt perpetually of Trichinopoly cigars and it was so full of spears, blow-pipes, brass ornaments, and the heads of wild animals that you could hardly move about in it.

Old Vincent had retired in 1910, and since then he and his wife had shown about as much activity, mental or physical, as a couple of shellfish. But at the time I was vaguely impressed by a family which had had majors, colonels, and once even an admiral in it. My attitude towards the Vincents, and theirs towards me, is an interesting illustration of what fools people can be when they get outside their own line. Put me among business people—whether they're company directors or commercial travellers—and I'm a fairly good judge of character. But I had no experience whatever of the officer-rentier-clergyman class, and I was inclined to kow-tow to these decayed throw-outs. I looked on them as my social and intellectual superiors, while they on the other hand mistook me for a rising young businessman who before long would be pulling down the big dough. To people of that kind, 'business', whether it's marine insurance or selling peanuts, is just a dark mystery. All they know is that it's something rather vulgar out of which you can make money. Old Vincent used to talk impressively about my being 'in business'—once, I remember, he had a slip of the tongue and said 'in trade'—and obviously didn't grasp the difference between being in business as an employee and being there on your own account. He had some vague notion that as I was 'in the Flying Salamander' I should sooner or later rise to the top of it, by a process of

promotion. I think it's possible that he also had pictures of himself touching me for fivers at some future date. Harold certainly had. I could see it in his eye. In fact, even with my income being what it is, I'd probably be lending money to Harold at this moment if he were alive. Luckily he died a few years after we were married, of enteric or something, and both the old Vincents are dead too.

Well, Hilda and I were married, and right from the start it was a flop. Why did you marry her? you say. But why did you marry yours? These things happen to us. I wonder whether you'll believe that during the first two or three years I had serious thoughts of killing Hilda. Of course in practice one never does these things, they're only a kind of fantasy that one enjoys thinking about. Besides, chaps who murder their wives always get copped. However cleverly you've faked the alibi, they know perfectly well that it's you who did it, and they'll pin it on to you somehow. When a woman's bumped off, her husband is always the first suspect—which gives you a little side-glimpse of what people really think about marriage.

One gets used to everything in time. After a year or two I stopped wanting to kill her and started wondering about her. Just wondering. For hours, sometimes, on Sunday afternoons or in the evening when I've come home from work, I've lain on my bed with all my clothes on except my shoes, wondering about women. Why they're like that, how they get like that, whether they're doing it on purpose. It seems to be a most frightful thing, the suddenness with which some women go to pieces after they're married. It's as if they were strung up to do just that one thing, and the instant they've done it they wither off like a flower that's set its seed. What really gets me down is the dreary attitude towards life that it implies. If marriage was just an open swindle—if the woman trapped you into it and then turned round and said, 'Now, you bastard, I've caught you and you're going to work for me while I have a good time!'—I

wouldn't mind so much. But not a bit of it. They don't want to have a good time, they merely want to slump into middle age as quickly as possible. After the frightful battle of getting her man to the altar, the woman kind of relaxes, and all her youth, looks, energy, and joy of life just vanish overnight. It was like that with Hilda. Here was this pretty, delicate girl, who'd seemed to me—and in fact when I first knew her she WAS—a finer type of animal than myself, and within only about three years she'd settled down into a depressed, lifeless, middle-aged frump. I'm not denying that I was part of the reason. But whoever she'd married it would have been much the same.

What Hilda lacks—I discovered this about a week after we were married—is any kind of joy in life, any kind of interest in things for their own sake. The idea of doing things because you enjoy them is something she can hardly understand. It was through Hilda that I first got a notion of what these decayed middle-class families are really like. The essential fact about them is that all their vitality has been drained away by lack of money. In families like that, which live on tiny pensions and annuities—that's to say on incomes which never get bigger and generally get smaller—there's more sense of poverty, more crust-wiping, and looking twice at sixpence, than you'd find in any farm-labourer's family, let alone a family like mine. Hilda's often told me that almost the first thing she can remember is a ghastly feeling that there was never enough money for anything. Of course, in that kind of family, the lack of money is always at its worst when the kids are at the school-age. Consequently they grow up, especially the girls, with a fixed idea not only that one always IS hard-up but that it's one's duty to be miserable about it.

At the beginning we lived in a poky little maisonette and had a job to get by on my wages. Later, when I was transferred to the West

Bletchley branch, things were better, but Hilda's attitude didn't change. Always that ghastly glooming about money! The milk bill! The coal bill! The rent! The school fees! We've lived all our life together to the tune of 'Next week we'll be in the workhouse.' It's not that Hilda's mean, in the ordinary sense of the word, and still less that she's selfish. Even when there happens to be a bit of spare cash knocking about I can hardly persuade her to buy herself any decent clothes. But she's got this feeling that you OUGHT to be perpetually working yourself up into a stew about lack of money. Just working up an atmosphere of misery from a sense of duty. I'm not like that. I've got more the prole's attitude towards money. Life's here to be lived, and if we're going to be in the soup next week—well, next week is a long way off. What really shocks her is the fact that I refuse to worry. She's always going for me about it. 'But, George! You don't seem to REALISE! We've simply got no money at all! It's very SERIOUS!' she loves getting into a panic because something or other is 'serious'. And of late she's got that trick, when she's glooming about something, of kind of hunching her shoulders and folding her arms across her breast. If you made a list of Hilda's remarks throughout the day, you'd find three bracketed together at the top—'We can't afford it', 'It's a great saving', and 'I don't know where the money's to come from'. She does everything for negative reasons. When she makes a cake she's not thinking about the cake, only about how to save butter and eggs. When I'm in bed with her all she thinks about is how not to have a baby. If she goes to the pictures she's all the time writhing with indignation about the price of the seats. Her methods of housekeeping, with all the emphasis on 'using things up' and 'making things do', would have given Mother convulsions. On the other hand, Hilda isn't in the least a snob. She's never looked down on me because I'm not a gentleman. On the contrary, from her point of view I'm much too lordly in my habits. We never have a meal in a tea-shop without a frightful row in whispers because I'm

tipping the waitress too much. And it's a curious thing that in the last few years she's become much more definitely lower-middle-class, in outlook and even in appearance, than I am. Of course all this 'saving' business has never led to anything. It never does. We live just about as well or as badly as the other people in Ellesmere Road. But the everlasting stew about the gas bill and the milk bill and the awful price of butter and the kids' boots and school-fees goes on and on. It's a kind of game with Hilda.

We moved to West Bletchley in '29 and started buying the house in Ellesmere Road the next year, a little before Billy was born. After I was made an Inspector I was more away from home and had more opportunities with other women. Of course I was unfaithful—I won't say all the time, but as often as I got the chance. Curiously enough, Hilda was jealous. In a way, considering how little that kind of thing means to her, I wouldn't have expected her to mind. And like all jealous women she'll sometimes show a cunning you wouldn't think her capable of. Sometimes the way she's caught me out would have made me believe in telepathy, if it wasn't that she's often been equally suspicious when I didn't happen to be guilty. I'm more or less permanently under suspicion, though, God knows, in the last few years—the last five years, anyway—I've been innocent enough. You have to be, when you're as fat as I am.

Taking it by and large, I suppose Hilda and I don't get on worse than about half the couples in Ellesmere Road. There've been times when I've thought of separation or divorce, but in our walk of life you don't do those things. You can't afford to. And then time goes on, and you kind of give up struggling. When you've lived with a woman for fifteen years, it's difficult to imagine life without her. She's part of the order of things. I dare say you might find things to object to in the sun and the moon, but do you really want to change them? Besides, there were the kids. Kids are a 'link', as they

say.Or a'tie'.Not to say a ball and fetter.

Of late years Hilda has made two great friends called Mrs.Wheeler and Miss Minns.Mrs.Wheeler is a widow,and I gather she's got very bitter ideas about the male sex.I can feel her kind of quivering with disapproval if I so much as come into the room.She's a faded little woman and gives you a curious impression that she's the same colour all over,a kind of greyish dust-colour,but she's full of energy.She's a bad influence on Hilda,because she's got the same passion for'saving'and'making things do',though in a slightly different form.With her it takes the form of thinking that you can have a good time without paying for it.She's for ever nosing out bargains and amusements that don't cost money.With people like that it doesn't matter a damn whether they want a thing or not,it's merely a question of whether they can get it on the cheap.When the big shops have their remnant sales Mrs.Wheeler's always at the head of the queue,and it's her greatest pride,after a day's hard fighting round the counter,to come out without having bought anything.Miss Minns is quite a different sort.She's really a sad case,poor Miss Minns.She's a tall thin woman of about thirty-eight,with black patent-leather hair and a very GOOD,trusting kind of face.She lives on some kind of tiny fixed income,an annuity or something,and I fancy she's a left-over from the old society of West Bletchley,when it was a little country town,before the suburb grew up.It's written all over her that her father was a clergyman and sat on her pretty heavily while he lived.They're a special by-product of the middle classes,these women who turn into withered bags before they even manage to escape from home.Poor old Miss Minns,for all her wrinkles,still looks exactly like a child.It's still a tremendous adventure to her not to go to church.She's always burbling about'modern progress'and'the woman's movement',and she's got a vague yearning to do something she calls'developing her mind',only

she doesn't quite know how to start.I think in the beginning she cottoned on to Hilda and Mrs.Wheeler out of pure loneliness,but now they take her with them wherever they go.

And the times they've had together,those three!Sometimes I've almost envied them.Mrs.Wheeler is the leading spirit.You couldn't name a kind of idiocy that she hasn't dragged them into at one time or another.Anything from theosophy to cat's-cradle,provided you can do it on the cheap.For months they went in for the food-crank business.Mrs.Wheeler had picked up a second-hand copy of some book called Radiant Energy which proved that you should live on lettuces and other things that don't cost money.Of course this appealed to Hilda,who immediately began starving herself.She'd have tried it on me and the kids as well,only I put my foot down.Then they had a go at faith-healing.Then they thought of tackling Pelmanism,but after a lot of correspondence they found that they couldn't get the booklets free,which had been Mrs.Wheeler's idea.Then it was hay-box cookery.Then it was some filthy stuff called bee wine,which was supposed to cost nothing at all because you made it out of water.They dropped that after they'd read an article in the paper saying that bee wine gives you cancer.Then they nearly joined one of those women's clubs which go for conducted tours round factories,but after a lot of arithmetic Mrs.Wheeler decided that the free teas the factories gave you didn't quite equal the subscription.Then Mrs.Wheeler scraped acquaintance with somebody who gave away free tickets for plays produced by some stage society or other.I've known the three of them sit for hours listening to some highbrow play of which they didn't even pretend to understand a word—couldn't even tell you the name of the play afterwards—but they felt that they were getting something for nothing.Once they even took up spiritualism.Mrs.Wheeler had run across some down-and-out

medium who was so desperate that he'd give seances for eighteenpence,so that the three of them could have a glimpse beyond the veil for a tanner a time.I saw him once when he came to give a seance at our house.He was a seedy-looking old devil and obviously in mortal terror of D.T.s.He was so shaky that when he was taking his overcoat off in the hall he had a sort of spasm and a hank of butter-muslin dropped out of his trouser-leg.I managed to shove it back to him before the women saw.Butter-muslin is what they make the ectoplasm with,so I'm told.I suppose he was going on to another seance afterwards.You don't get manifestations for eighteen pence.Mrs.Wheeler's biggest find of the last few years is the Left Book Club.I think it was in'36 that the news of the Left Book Club got to West Bletchley.I joined it soon afterwards,and it's almost the only time I can remember spending money without Hilda protesting.She can see some sense in buying a book when you're getting it for a third of its proper price.These women's attitude is curious,really.Miss Minns certainly had a try at reading one or two of the books,but this wouldn't even have occurred to the other two.They've never had any direct connexion with the Left Book Club or any notion what it's all about—in fact I believe at the beginning Mrs.Wheeler thought it had something to do with books which had been left in railway carriages and were being sold off cheap.But they do know that it means seven and sixpenny books for half a crown,and so they're always saying that it's'such a good idea'.Now and again the local Left Book Club branch holds meetings and gets people down to speak,and Mrs.Wheeler always takes the others along.She's a great one for public meetings of any kind,always provided that it's indoors and admission free.The three of them sit there like lumps of pudding.They don't know what the meeting's about and they don't care,but they've got a vague feeling,especially Miss Minns,that they're improving their minds,and it isn't costing them anything.

Well,that's Hilda.You see what she's like.Take it by and large,I suppose she's no worse than I am.Sometimes when we were first married I felt I'd like to strangle her,but later I got so that I didn't care.And then I got fat and settled down.It must have been in 1930 that I got fat.It happened so suddenly that it was as if a cannon ball had hit me and got stuck inside.You know how it is.One night you go to bed,still feeling more or less young,with an eye for the girls and so forth,and next morning you wake up in the full consciousness that you're just a poor old fatty with nothing ahead of you this side the grave except sweating your guts out to buy boots for the kids.

And now it's'38,and in every shipyard in the world they're riveting up the battleships for another war,and a name I chanced to see on a poster had stirred up in me a whole lot of stuff which ought to have been buried God knows how many years ago.

Part III

1

When I came home that evening I was still in doubt as to what I'd spend my seventeen quid on.

Hilda said she was going to the Left Book Club meeting. It seemed that there was a chap coming down from London to lecture, though needless to say Hilda didn't know what the lecture was going to be about. I told her I'd go with her. In a general way I'm not much of a one for lectures, but the visions of war I'd had that morning, starting with the bomber flying over the train, had put me into a kind of thoughtful mood. After the usual argument we got the kids to bed early and cleared off in time for the lecture, which was billed for eight o'clock.

It was a misty kind of evening, and the hall was cold and not too well lighted. It's a little wooden hall with a tin roof, the property of some Nonconformist sect or other, and you can hire it for ten bob. The usual crowd of fifteen or sixteen people had rolled up. On the front of the platform there was a yellow placard announcing that the lecture was on 'The Menace of Fascism'. This didn't altogether surprise me. Mr. Witchett, who acts as chairman of these meetings and who in private life is something in an architect's office, was taking the lecturer round, introducing him to everyone as Mr. So-and-so (I forget his name) 'the well-known anti-Fascist', very much as you might call somebody 'the well-known pianist'. The lecturer was a little chap of about forty, in a dark suit, with a bald head which he'd tried rather unsuccessfully to cover up with wisps

of hair.

Meetings of this kind never start on time. There's always a period of hanging about on the pretence that perhaps a few more people are going to turn up. It was about twenty-five past eight when Witchett tapped on the table and did his stuff. Witchett's a mild-looking chap, with a pink, baby's bottom kind of face that's always covered in smiles. I believe he's secretary of the local Liberal Party, and he's also on the Parish Council and acts as M.C. at the magic lantern lectures for the Mothers' Union. He's what you might call a born chairman. When he tells you how delighted we all are to have Mr. So-and-so on the platform tonight, you can see that he believes it. I never look at him without thinking that he's probably a virgin. The little lecturer took out a wad of notes, chiefly newspaper cuttings, and pinned them down with his glass of water. Then he gave a quick lick at his lips and began to shoot.

Do you ever go to lectures, public meetings, and what-not?

When I go to one myself, there's always a moment during the evening when I find myself thinking the same thought: Why the hell are we doing this? Why is it that people will turn out on a winter night for this kind of thing? I looked round the hall. I was sitting in the back row. I don't ever remember going to any kind of public meeting when I didn't sit in the back row if I could manage it. Hilda and the others had planked themselves in front, as usual. It was rather a gloomy little hall. You know the kind of place. Pitch-pine walls, corrugated iron roof, and enough draughts to make you want to keep your overcoat on. The little knot of us were sitting in the light round the platform, with about thirty rows of empty chairs behind us. And the seats of all the chairs were dusty. On the platform behind the lecturer there was a huge square thing draped in dust-cloths which might have been an enormous coffin under a

pall. Actually it was a piano.

At the beginning I wasn't exactly listening. The lecturer was rather a mean-looking little chap, but a good speaker. White face, very mobile mouth, and the rather grating voice that they get from constant speaking. Of course he was pitching into Hitler and the Nazis. I wasn't particularly keen to hear what he was saying—get the same stuff in the News Chronicle every morning—but his voice came across to me as a kind of burr-burr-burr, with now and again a phrase that struck out and caught my attention.

'Bestial atrocities.....Hideous outbursts of sadism.....Rubber truncheons.....Concentration camps.....Iniquitous persecution of the Jews.....Back to the Dark Ages.....European civilisation.....Act before it is too late.....Indignation of all decent peoples.....Alliance of the democratic nations.....Firm stand.....Defence of democracy.....Democracy.....Fascism.....Democracy.....Fascism.....Democracy.....'

You know the line of talk. These chaps can churn it out by the hour. Just like a gramophone. Turn the handle, press the button, and it starts. Democracy, Fascism, Democracy. But somehow it interested me to watch him. A rather mean little man, with a white face and a bald head, standing on a platform, shooting out slogans. What's he doing? Quite deliberately, and quite openly, he's stirring up hatred. Doing his damndest to make you hate certain foreigners called Fascists. It's a queer thing, I thought, to be known as 'Mr. So-and-so, the well-known anti-Fascist'. A queer trade, anti-Fascism. This fellow, I suppose, makes his living by writing books against Hitler. But what did he do before Hitler came along? And what'll he do if Hitler ever disappears? Same question applies to doctors, detectives, rat-catchers, and so forth, of course. But the grating voice went on and on, and another thought struck me. He MEANS

it. Not faking at all—feels every word he's saying. He's trying to work up hatred in the audience, but that's nothing to the hatred he feels himself. Every slogan's gospel truth to him. If you cut him open all you'd find inside would be Democracy-Fascism-Democracy. Interesting to know a chap like that in private life. But does he have a private life? Or does he only go round from platform to platform, working up hatred? Perhaps even his dreams are slogans.

As well as I could from the back row I had a look at the audience. I suppose, if you come to think of it, we people who'll turn out on winter nights to sit in draughty halls listening to Left Book Club lectures (and I consider that I'm entitled to the 'we', seeing that I'd done it myself on this occasion) have a certain significance. We're the West Bletchley revolutionaries. Doesn't look hopeful at first sight. It struck me as I looked round the audience that only about half a dozen of them had really grasped what the lecturer was talking about, though by this time he'd been pitching into Hitler and the Nazis for over half an hour. It's always like that with meetings of this kind. Invariably half the people come away without a notion of what it's all about. In his chair beside the table Witchett was watching the lecturer with a delighted smile, and his face looked a little like a pink geranium. You could hear in advance the speech he'd make as soon as the lecturer sat down—same speech as he makes at the end of the magic lantern lecture in aid of trousers for the Melanesians: 'Express our thanks—voicing the opinion of all of us—most interesting—give us all a lot to think about—most stimulating evening!' In the front row Miss Minns was sitting very upright, with her head cocked a little on one side, like a bird. The lecturer had taken a sheet of paper from under the tumbler and was reading out statistics about the German suicide-rate. You could see by the look of Miss Minns's long thin neck that she wasn't feeling

happy. Was this improving her mind, or wasn't it? If only she could make out what it was all about! The other two were sitting there like lumps of pudding. Next to them a little woman with red hair was knitting a jumper. One plain, two purl, drop one, and knit two together. The lecturer was describing how the Nazis chop people's heads off for treason and sometimes the executioner makes a bosh shot. There was one other woman in the audience, a girl with dark hair, one of the teachers at the Council School. Unlike the other she was really listening, sitting forward with her big round eyes fixed on the lecturer and her mouth a little bit open, drinking it all in.

Just behind her two old blokes from the local Labour Party were sitting. One had grey hair cropped very short, the other had a bald head and a droopy moustache. Both wearing their overcoats. You know the type. Been in the Labour Party since the year dot. Lives given up to the movement. Twenty years of being blacklisted by employers, and another ten of badgering the Council to do something about the slums. Suddenly everything's changed, the old Labour Party stuff doesn't matter any longer. Find themselves pitchforked into foreign politics—Hitler, Stalin, bombs, machine-guns, rubber truncheons, Rome-Berlin axis, Popular Front, anti-Comintern pact. Can't make head or tail of it. Immediately in front of me the local Communist Party branch were sitting. All three of them very young. One of them's got money and is something in the Hesperides Estate Company, in fact I believe he's old Crum's nephew. Another's a clerk at one of the banks. He cashes cheques for me occasionally. A nice boy, with a round, very young, eager face, blue eyes like a baby, and hair so fair that you'd think he peroxidized it. He only looks about seventeen, though I suppose he's twenty. He was wearing a cheap blue suit and a bright blue tie that went with his hair. Next to these three another Communist was sitting. But this one, it seems, is a different kind of Communist and not-quite, because

he's what they call a Trotskyist. The others have got a down on him. He's even younger, a very thin, very dark, nervous-looking boy. Clever face. Jew, of course. These four were taking the lecture quite differently from the others. You knew they'd be on their feet the moment question-time started. You could see them kind of twitching already. And the little Trotskyist working himself from side to side on his bum in his anxiety to get in ahead of the others.

I'd stopped listening to the actual words of the lecture. But there are more ways than one of listening. I shut my eyes for a moment. The effect of that was curious. I seemed to see the fellow much better when I could only hear his voice.

It was a voice that sounded as if it could go on for a fortnight without stopping. It's a ghastly thing, really, to have a sort of human barrel-organ shooting propaganda at you by the hour. The same thing over and over again. Hate, hate, hate. Let's all get together and have a good hate. Over and over. It gives you the feeling that something has got inside your skull and is hammering down on your brain. But for a moment, with my eyes shut, I managed to turn the tables on him. I got inside HIS skull. It was a peculiar sensation. For about a second I was inside him, you might almost say I WAS him. At any rate, I felt what he was feeling.

I saw the vision that he was seeing. And it wasn't at all the kind of vision that can be talked about. What he's SAYING is merely that Hitler's after us and we must all get together and have a good hate. Doesn't go into details. Leaves it all respectable. But what he's SEEING is something quite different. It's a picture of himself smashing people's faces in with a spanner. Fascist faces, of course. I KNOW that's what he was seeing. It was what I saw myself for the second or two that I was inside him. Smash! Right in the middle! The bones cave in like an eggshell and what was a face a minute ago is

just a great big blob of strawberry jam. Smash! There goes another! That's what's in his mind, waking and sleeping, and the more he thinks of it the more he likes it. And it's all O.K. because the smashed faces belong to Fascists. You could hear all that in the tone of his voice.

But why? Likeliest explanation, because he's scared. Every thinking person nowadays is stiff with fright. This is merely a chap who's got sufficient foresight to be a little more frightened than the others. Hitler's after us! Quick! Let's all grab a spanner and get together, and perhaps if we smash in enough faces they won't smash ours. Gang up, choose your Leader. Hitler's black and Stalin's white. But it might just as well be the other way about, because in the little chap's mind both Hitler and Stalin are the same. Both mean spanners and smashed faces.

War! I started thinking about it again. It's coming soon, that's certain. But who's afraid of war? That's to say, who's afraid of the bombs and the machine-guns? 'You are', you say. Yes, I am, and so's anybody who's ever seen them. But it isn't the war that matters, it's the after-war. The world we're going down into, the kind of hate-world, slogan-world. The coloured shirts, the barbed wire, the rubber truncheons. The secret cells where the electric light burns night and day, and the detectives watching you while you sleep. And the processions and the posters with enormous faces, and the crowds of a million people all cheering for the Leader till they deafen themselves into thinking that they really worship him, and all the time, underneath, they hate him so that they want to puke. It's all going to happen. Or isn't it? Some days I know it's impossible, other days I know it's inevitable. That night, at any rate, I knew it was going to happen. It was all in the sound of the little lecturer's voice.

So perhaps after all there IS a significance in this mingy little

crowd that'll turn out on a winter night to listen to a lecture of this kind.Or at any rate in the five or six who can grasp what it's all about.They're simply the outposts of an enormous army.They're the long-sighted ones,the first rats to spot that the ship is sinking.Quick,quick!The Fascists are coming!Spanners ready,boys! Smash others or they'll smash you.So terrified of the future that we're jumping straight into it like a rabbit diving down a boa-constrictor's throat.

And what'll happen to chaps like me when we get Fascism in England?The truth is it probably won't make the slightest difference.As for the lecturer and those four Communists in the audience,yes,it'll make plenty of difference to them.They'll be smashing faces,or having their own smashed,according to who's winning.But the ordinary middling chaps like me will be carrying on just as usual.And yet it frightens me—I tell you it frightens me.I'd just started to wonder why when the lecturer stopped and sat down.

There was the usual hollow little sound of clapping that you get when there are only about fifteen people in the audience,and then old Witchett said his piece,and before you could say Jack Robinson the four Communists were on their feet together.They had a good dog-fight that went on for about ten minutes,full of a lot of stuff that nobody else understood,such as dialectical materialism and the destiny of the proletariat and what Lenin said in 1918.Then the lecturer,who'd had a drink of water,stood up and gave a summing-up that made the Trotskyist wriggle about on his chair but pleased the other three,and the dog-fight went on unofficially for a bit longer.Nobody else did any talking.Hilda and the others had cleared off the moment the lecture ended.Probably they were afraid there was going to be a collection to pay for the hire of the hall.The little woman with red hair was staying to finish her row.You could

hear her counting her stitches in a whisper while the others argued. And Witchett sat and beamed at whoever happened to be speaking, and you could see him thinking how interesting it all was and making mental notes, and the girl with black hair looked from one to the other with her mouth a little open, and the old Labour man, looking rather like a seal with his droopy moustache and his overcoat up to his ears, sat looking up at them, wondering what the hell it was all about. And finally I got up and began to put on my overcoat.

The dog-fight had turned into a private row between the little Trotskyist and the boy with fair hair. They were arguing about whether you ought to join the Army if war broke out. As I edged my way along the row of chairs to get out, the fair-haired one appealed to me.

'Mr. Bowling! Look here. If war broke out and we had the chance to smash Fascism once and for all, wouldn't you fight? If you were young, I mean.'

I suppose he thinks I'm about sixty.

'You bet I wouldn't,' I said. 'I had enough to go on with last time.'

'But to smash Fascism!'

'Oh, b—Fascism! There's been enough smashing done already, if you ask me.'

The little Trotskyist chips in with social-patriotism and betrayal of the workers, but the others cut him short:

'But you're thinking of 1914. That was just an ordinary imperialist war. This time it's different. Look here. When you hear about what's going on in Germany, and the concentration camps and

the Nazis beating people up with rubber truncheons and making the Jews spit in each other's faces—doesn't it make your blood boil?'

They're always going on about your blood boiling. Just the same phrase during the war, I remember.

'I went off the boil in 1916, I told him. 'And so'll you when you know what a trench smells like.'

And then all of a sudden I seemed to see him. It was as if I hadn't properly seen him till that moment.

A very young eager face, might have belonged to a good-looking schoolboy, with blue eyes and tow-coloured hair, gazing into mine, and for a moment actually he'd got tears in his eyes! Felt as strongly as all that about the German Jews! But as a matter of fact I knew just what he felt. He's a hefty lad, probably plays rugger for the bank. Got brains, too. And here he is, a bank clerk in a godless suburb, sitting behind the frosted window, entering figures in a ledger, counting piles of notes, bumsucking to the manager. Feels his life rotting away. And all the while, over in Europe, the big stuff's happening. Shells bursting over the trenches and waves of infantry charging through the drifts of smoke. Probably some of his pals are fighting in Spain. Of course he's spoiling for a war. How can you blame him? For a moment I had a peculiar feeling that he was my son, which in point of years he might have been. And I thought of that sweltering hot day in August when the newsboy stuck up the poster ENGLAND DECLARES WAR ON GERMANY, and we all rushed out on to the pavement in our white aprons and cheered.

'Listen son, I said, 'you've got it all wrong. In 1914 WE thought it was going to be a glorious business. Well, it wasn't. It was just a bloody mess. If it comes again, you keep out of it. Why should you get your body plugged full of lead? Keep it for some girl. You think war's

all heroism and V.C.charges,but I tell you it isn't like that.You don't have bayonet-charges nowadays,and when you do it isn't like you imagine.You don't feel like a hero.All you know is that you've had no sleep for three days,and stink like a polecat,you're pissing your bags with fright,and your hands are so cold you can't hold your rifle.But that doesn't matter a damn,either.It's the things that happen afterwards.'

Makes no impression of course.They just think you're out of date.Might as well stand at the door of a knocking-shop handing out tracts.

The people were beginning to clear off.Witchett was taking the lecturer home.The three Communists and the little Jew went up the road together,and they were going at it again with proletarian solidarity and dialectic of the dialectic and what Trotsky said in 1917.They're all the same,really.It was a damp,still,very black night.The lamps seemed to hang in the darkness like stars and didn't light the road.In the distance you could hear the trams booming along the High Street.I wanted a drink,but it was nearly ten and the nearest pub was half a mile away.Besides,I wanted somebody to talk to,the way you can't talk in a pub.It was funny how my brain had been on the go all day.Partly the result of not working,of course,and partly of the new false teeth,which had kind of freshened me up.All day I'd been brooding on the future and the past.I wanted to talk about the bad time that's either coming or isn't coming,the slogans and the coloured shirts and the streamlined men from eastern Europe who are going to knock old England cock-eyed.Hopeless trying to talk to Hilda.Suddenly it occurred to me to go and look up old Porteous,who's a pal of mine and keeps late hours.

Porteous is a retired public-school master.He lives in

rooms, which luckily are in the lower half of the house, in the old part of the town, near the church. He's a bachelor, of course. You can't imagine that kind married. Lives all alone with his books and his pipe and has a woman in to do for him. He's a learned kind of chap, with his Greek and Latin and poetry and all that. I suppose that if the local Left Book Club branch represents Progress, old Porteous stands for Culture. Neither of them cuts much ice in West Bletchley.

The light was burning in the little room where old Porteous sits reading till all hours of the night. As I tapped on the front door he came strolling out as usual, with his pipe between his teeth and his fingers in a book to keep the place. He's rather a striking looking chap, very tall, with curly grey hair and a thin, dreamy kind of face that's a bit discoloured but might almost belong to a boy, though he must be nearly sixty. It's funny how some of these public-school and university chaps manage to look like boys till their dying day. It's something in their movements. Old Porteous has got a way of strolling up and down, with that handsome head of his, with the grey curls, held a little back that makes you feel that all the while he's dreaming about some poem or other and isn't conscious of what's going on round him. You can't look at him without seeing the way he's lived written all over him. Public School, Oxford, and then back to his old school as a master. Whole life lived in an atmosphere of Latin, Greek, and cricket. He's got all the mannerisms. Always wears an old Harris tweed jacket and old grey flannel bags which he likes you to call 'disgraceful', smokes a pipe and looks down on cigarettes, and though he sits up half the night I bet he has a cold bath every morning. I suppose from his point of view I'm a bit of a bounder. I haven't been to a public school, I don't know any Latin and don't even want to. He tells me sometimes that it's a pity I'm 'insensible to beauty', which I suppose is a polite way of saying that I've got no education. All the same I like him. He's very

hospitable in the right kind of way,always ready to have you in and talk at all hours,and always got drinks handy.When you live in a house like ours,more or less infested by women and kids,it does you good to get out of it sometimes into a bachelor atmosphere,a kind of book-pipe-fire atmosphere.And the classy Oxford feeling of nothing mattering except books and poetry and Greek statues,and nothing worth mentioning having happened since the Goths sacked Rome—sometimes that's a comfort too.

He shoved me into the old leather armchair by the fire and dished out whisky and soda.I've never seen his sitting-room when it wasn't dim with pipe-smoke.The ceiling is almost black.It's a smallish room and,except for the door and the window and the space over the fireplace,the walls are covered with books from the floor right up to the ceiling.On the mantelpiece there are all the things you'd expect.A row of old briar pipes,all filthy,a few Greek silver coins,a tobacco jar with the arms of old Porteous's college on it,and a little earthenware lamp which he told me he dug up on some mountain in Sicily.Over the mantelpiece there are photos of Greek statues.There's a big one in the middle,of a woman with wings and no head who looks as if she was stepping out to catch a bus.I remember how shocked old Porteous was when the first time I saw it,not knowing any better,I asked him why they didn't stick a head on it.

Porteous started refilling his pipe from the jar on the mantelpiece.

'That intolerable woman upstairs has purchased a wireless set,'he said.I had been hoping to live the rest of my life out of the sound of those things.I suppose there is nothing one can do?Do you happen to know the legal position?'

I told him there was nothing one could do. I rather like the Oxford way he says 'intolerable', and it tickles me, in 1938, to find someone objecting to having a radio in the house. Porteous was strolling up and down in his usual dreamy way, with his hands in his coat pockets and his pipe between his teeth, and almost instantly he'd begun talking about some law against musical instruments that was passed in Athens in the time of Pericles. It's always that way with old Porteous. All his talk is about things that happened centuries ago. Whatever you start off with it always comes back to statues and poetry and the Greeks and Romans. If you mention the Queen Mary he'd start telling you about Phoenician triremes. He never reads a modern book, refuses to know their names, never looks at any newspaper except The Times, and takes a pride in telling you that he's never been to the pictures. Except for a few poets like Keats and Wordsworth he thinks the modern world—and from his point of view the modern world is the last two thousand years—just oughtn't to have happened.

I'm part of the modern world myself, but I like to hear him talk. He'll stroll round the shelves and haul out first one book and then another, and now and again he'll read you a piece between little puffs of smoke, generally having to translate it from the Latin or something as he goes. It's all kind of peaceful, kind of mellow. All a little like a school-master, and yet it soothes you, somehow. While you listen you aren't in the same world as trains and gas bills and insurance companies. It's all temples and olive trees, and peacocks and elephants, and chaps in the arena with their nets and tridents, and winged lions and eunuchs and galleys and catapults, and generals in brass armour galloping their horses over the soldiers' shields. It's funny that he ever cottoned on to a chap like me. But it's one of the advantages of being fat that you can fit into almost any society. Besides we meet on common ground when it

comes to dirty stories.They're the one modern thing he cares about,though,as he's always reminding me,they aren't modern.He's rather old-maidish about it,always tells a story in a veiled kind of way.Sometimes he'll pick out some Latin poet and translate a smutty rhyme,leaving a lot to your imagination,or he'll drop hints about the private lives of the Roman emperors and the things that went on in the temples of Ashtaroath.They seem to have been a bad lot,those Greeks and Romans.Old Porteous has got photographs of wall-paintings somewhere in Italy that would make your hair curl.

When I'm fed up with business and home life it's often done me a lot of good to go and have a talk with Porteous.But tonight it didn't seem to.My mind was still running on the same lines as it had been all day.Just as I'd done with the Left Book Club lecturer,I didn't exactly listen to what Porreous was saying,only to the sound of his voice.But whereas the lecturer's voice had got under my skin,old Porteous's didn't.It was too peaceful,too Oxfordy.Finally,when he was in the middle of saying something,I chipped in and said:

'Tell me,Porteous,what do you think of Hitler?'

Old Porteous was leaning in his lanky,graceful kind of way with his elbows on the mantelpiece and a foot on the fender.He was so surprised that he almost took his pipe out of his mouth.

'Hitler?This German person?My dear fellow!I DON'T think of him.'

'But the trouble is he's going to bloody well make us think about him before he's finished.'

Old Porteous shies a bit at the world'bloody',which he doesn't like,though of course it's part of his pose never to be shocked.He

begins walking up and down again, puffing out smoke.

'I see no reason for paying any attention to him. A mere adventurer. These people come and go. Ephemeral, purely ephemeral.'

I'm not certain what the word 'ephemeral' means, but I stick to my point:

'I think you've got it wrong. Old Hitler's something different. So's Joe Stalin. They aren't like these chaps in the old days who crucified people and chopped their heads off and so forth, just for the fun of it. They're after something quite new—something that's never been heard of before.'

'My dear fellow! There is nothing new under the sun.'

Of course that's a favourite saying of old Porteous's. He won't hear of the existence of anything new. As soon as you tell him about anything that's happening nowadays he says that exactly the same thing happened in the reign of King So-and-so. Even if you bring up things like aeroplanes he tells you that they probably had them in Crete, or Mycenae, or wherever it was. I tried to explain to him what I'd felt while the little bloke was lecturing and the kind of vision I'd had of the bad time that's coming, but he wouldn't listen. Merely repeated that there's nothing new under the sun. Finally he hauls a book out of the shelves and reads me a passage about some Greek tyrant back in the B.C.s who certainly might have been Hitler's twin brother.

The argument went on for a bit. All day I'd been wanting to talk to somebody about this business. It's funny. I'm not a fool, but I'm not a highbrow either, and God knows at normal times I don't have many interests that you wouldn't expect a middle-aged seven-

pound-a-weeker with two kids to have. And yet I've enough sense to see that the old life we're used to is being sawn off at the roots. I can feel it happening. I can see the war that's coming and I can see the after-war, the food-queues and the secret police and the loudspeakers telling you what to think. And I'm not even exceptional in this. There are millions of others like me. Ordinary chaps that I meet everywhere, chaps I run across in pubs, bus drivers, and travelling salesmen for hardware firms, have got a feeling that the world's gone wrong. They can feel things cracking and collapsing under their feet. And yet here's this learned chap, who's lived all his life with books and soaked himself in history till it's running out of his pores, and he can't even see that things are changing. Doesn't think Hitler matters. Refuses to believe there's another war coming. In any case, as he didn't fight in the last war, it doesn't enter much into his thoughts—he thinks it was a poor show compared with the siege of Troy. Doesn't see why one should bother about the slogans and the loudspeakers and the coloured shirts. What intelligent person would pay any attention to such things? he always says. Hitler and Stalin will pass away, but something which old Porteous calls 'the eternal verities' won't pass away. This, of course, is simply another way of saying that things will always go on exactly as he's known them. For ever and ever, cultivated Oxford blokes will stroll up and down studies full of books, quoting Latin tags and smoking good tobacco out of jars with coats of arms on them. Really it was no use talking to him. I'd have got more change out of the lad with tow-coloured hair. By degrees the conversation twisted off, as it always does, to things that happened B.C. Then it worked round to poetry. Finally old Porteous drags another book out of the shelves and begins reading Keat's 'Ode to a Nightingale' (or maybe it was a skylark—I forget).

So far as I'm concerned a little poetry goes a long way. But it's a

curious fact that I rather like hearing old Porteous reading it aloud. There's no question that he reads well. He's got the habit, of course—used to reading to classes of boys. He'll lean up against something in his lounging way, with his pipe between his teeth and little jets of smoke coming out, and his voice goes kind of solemn and rises and falls with the line. You can see that it moves him in some way. I don't know what poetry is or what it's supposed to do. I imagine it has a kind of nervous effect on some people like music has on others. When he's reading I don't actually listen, that's to say I don't take in the words, but sometimes the sound of it brings a kind of peaceful feeling into my mind. On the whole I like it. But somehow tonight it didn't work. It was as if a cold draught had blown into the room. I just felt that this was all bunk. Poetry! What is it? Just a voice, a bit of an eddy in the air. And Gosh! what use would that be against machine-guns?

I watched him leaning up against the bookshelf. Funny, these public-school chaps. Schoolboys all their days. Whole life revolving round the old school and their bits of Latin and Greek and poetry. And suddenly I remembered that almost the first time I was here with Porteous he'd read me the very same poem. Read it in just the same way, and his voice quivered when he got to the same bit—the bit about magic casements, or something. And a curious thought struck me. HE'S DEAD. He's a ghost. All people like that are dead.

It struck me that perhaps a lot of the people you see walking about are dead. We say that a man's dead when his heart stops and not before. It seems a bit arbitrary. After all, parts of your body don't stop working—hair goes on growing for years, for instance. Perhaps a man really dies when his brain stops, when he loses the power to take in a new idea. Old Porteous is like that. Wonderfully learned, wonderfully good taste—but he's not capable of change. Just says the same things and thinks the same thoughts over and over

again. There are a lot of people like that. Dead minds, stopped inside. Just keep moving backwards and forwards on the same little track, getting fainter all the time, like ghosts.

Old Porteous's mind, I thought, probably stopped working at about the time of the Russo-Japanese War. And it's a ghastly thing that nearly all the decent people, the people who DON'T want to go round smashing faces in with spanners, are like that. They're decent, but their minds have stopped. They can't defend themselves against what's coming to them, because they can't see it, even when it's under their noses. They think that England will never change and that England's the whole world. Can't grasp that it's just a left-over, a tiny corner that the bombs happen to have missed. But what about the new kind of men from eastern Europe, the streamlined men who think in slogans and talk in bullets? They're on our track. Not long before they catch up with us. No Marquess of Queensbury rules for those boys. And all the decent people are paralysed. Dead men and live gorillas. Doesn't seem to be anything between.

I cleared out about half an hour later, having completely failed to convince old Porteous that Hitler matters. I was still thinking the same thoughts as I walked home through the shivery streets. The trains had stopped running. The house was all dark and Hilda was asleep. I dropped my false teeth into the glass of water in the bathroom, got into my pyjamas, and prised Hilda over to the other side of the bed. She rolled over without waking, and the kind of hump between her shoulders was towards me. It's funny, the tremendous gloom that sometimes gets hold of you late at night. At that moment the destiny of Europe seemed to me more important than the rent and the kids' school-bills and the work I'd have to do tomorrow. For anyone who has to earn his living such thoughts are just plain foolishness. But they didn't move out of my mind. Still the vision of the coloured shirts and the machine-guns rattling. The last

thing I remember wondering before I fell asleep was why the hell a chap like me should care.

2

The primroses had started.I suppose it was some time in March.

I'd driven through Westerham and was making for Pudley.I'd got to do an assessment of an ironmonger's shop,and then,if I could get hold of him,to interview a life-insurance case who was wavering in the balance.His name had been sent in by our local agent,but at the last moment he'd taken fright and begun to doubt whether he could afford it.I'm pretty good at talking people round.It's being fat that does it.It puts people in a cheery kind of mood,makes'em feel that signing a cheque is almost a pleasure.Of course there are different ways of tackling different people.With some it's better to lay all the stress on the bonuses,others you can scare in a subtle way with hints about what'll happen to their wives if they die uninsured.

The old car switchbacked up and down the curly little hills.And by God,what a day!You know the kind of day that generally comes some time in March when winter suddenly seems to give up fighting.For days past we'd been having the kind of beastly weather that people call'bright'weather,when the sky's a cold hard blue and the wind scrapes you like a blunt razor-blade.Then suddenly the wind had dropped and the sun got a chance.You know the kind of day.Pale yellow sunshine,not a leaf stirring,a touch of mist in the far distance where you could see the sheep scattered over the hillsides like lumps of chalk.And down in the valleys fires were burning,and the smoke twisted slowly upwards and melted into the mist.I'd got the road to myself.It was so warm you could almost have taken your clothes off.

I got to a spot where the grass beside the road was smothered in primroses. A patch of clayey soil, perhaps. Twenty yards farther on I slowed down and stopped. The weather was too good to miss. I felt I'd got to get out and have a smell at the spring air, and perhaps even pick a few primroses if there was nobody coming. I even had some vague notion of picking a bunch of them to take home to Hilda.

I switched the engine off and got out. I never like leaving the old car running in neutral, I'm always half afraid she'll shake her mudguards off or something. She's a 1927 model, and she's done a biggish mileage. When you lift the bonnet and look at the engine it reminds you of the old Austrian Empire, all tied together with bits of string but somehow keeps plugging along. You wouldn't believe any machine could vibrate in so many directions at once. It's like the motion of the earth, which has twenty-two different kinds of wobble, or so I remember reading. If you look at her from behind when she's running in neutral it's for all the world like watching one of those Hawaiian girls dancing the hula-hula.

There was a five-barred gate beside the road. I strolled over and leaned across it. Not a soul in sight. I hitched my hat back a bit to get the kind of balmy feeling of the air against my forehead. The grass under the hedge was full of primroses. Just inside the gate a tramp or somebody had left the remains of a fire. A little pile of white embers and a wisp of smoke still oozing out of them. Farther along there was a little bit of a pool, covered over with duck-weed. The field was winter wheat. It sloped up sharply, and then there was a fall of chalk and a little beech spinney. A kind of mist of young leaves on the trees. And utter stillness everywhere. Not even enough wind to stir the ashes of the fire. A lark singing somewhere, otherwise not a sound, not even an aeroplane.

I stayed there for a bit,leaning over the gate.I was alone,quite alone.I was looking at the field,and the field was looking at me.I felt—I wonder whether you'll understand.

What I felt was something that's so unusual nowadays that to say it sounds like foolishness.I felt HAPPY.I felt that though I shan't live for ever,I'd be quite ready to.If you like you can say that that was merely because it was the first day of spring.Seasonal effect on the sex-glands,or something.But there was more to it than that.Curiously enough,the thing that had suddenly convinced me that life was worth living,more than the primroses or the young buds on the hedge,was that bit of fire near the gate.You know the look of a wood fire on a still day.The sticks that have gone all to white ash and still keep the shape of sticks,and under the ash the kind of vivid red that you can see into.It's curious that a red ember looks more alive,gives you more of a feeling of life than any living thing.There's something about it,a kind of intensity,a vibration—I can't think of the exact words.But it lets you know that you're alive yourself.It's the spot on the picture that makes you notice everything else.

I bent down to pick a primrose.Couldn't reach it—too much belly.I squatted down on my haunches and picked a little bunch of them.Lucky there was no one to see me.The leaves were kind of crinkly and shaped like rabbits'ears.I stood up and put my bunch of primroses on the gatepost.Then on an impulse I slid my false teeth out of my mouth and had a look at them.

If I'd had a mirror I'd have looked at the whole of myself,though,as a matter of fact,I knew what I looked like already.A fat man of forty-five,in a grey herring-bone suit a bit the worse for wear and a bowler hat.Wife,two kids,and a house in the suburbs written all over me.Red face and boiled blue eyes.I

know,you don't have to tell me.But the thing that struck me,as I gave my dental plate the once-over before slipping it back into my mouth,was that IT DOESN'T MATTER.Even false teeth don't matter.I'm fat—yes.I look like a bookie's unsuccessful brother—yes.No woman will ever go to bed with me again unless she's paid to.I know all that.But I tell you I don't care.I don't want the women,I don't even want to be young again.I only want to be alive.And I was alive that moment when I stood looking at the primroses and the red embers under the hedge.It's a feeling inside you,a kind of peaceful feeling,and yet it's like a flame.

Farther down the hedge the pool was covered with duck-weed,so like a carpet that if you didn't know what duck-weed was you might think it was solid and step on it.I wondered why it is that we're all such bloody fools.Why don't people,instead of the idiocies they do spend their time on,just walk round LOOKING at things? That pool,for instance—all the stuff that's in it.Newts,water-snails,water-beetles,caddis-flies,leeches,and God knows how many other things that you can only see with a microscope.The mystery of their lives,down there under water.You could spend a lifetime watching them,ten lifetimes,and still you wouldn't have got to the end even of that one pool.And all the while the sort of feeling of wonder,the peculiar flame inside you.It's the only thing worth having,and we don't want it.

But I do want it.At least I thought so at that moment.And don't mistake what I'm saying.To begin with,unlike most Cockneys,I'm not soppy about'the country'.I was brought up a damn sight too near to it for that.I don't want to stop people living in towns,or in suburbs for that matter.Let'em live where they like.And I'm not suggesting that the whole of humanity could spend the whole of their lives wandering round picking primroses and so forth.I know perfectly well that we've got to work.It's only because chaps are

coughing their lungs out in mines and girls are hammering at typewriters that anyone ever has time to pick a flower. Besides, if you hadn't a full belly and a warm house you wouldn't want to pick flowers. But that's not the point. Here's this feeling that I get inside me—not often, I admit, but now and again. I know it's a good feeling to have. What's more, so does everybody else, or nearly everybody. It's just round the corner all the time, and we all know it's there. Stop firing that machine-gun! Stop chasing whatever you're chasing! Calm down, get your breath back, let a bit of peace seep into your bones. No use. We don't do it. Just keep on with the same bloody fooleries.

And the next war coming over the horizon, 1941, they say. Three more circles of the sun, and then we whizz straight into it. The bombs diving down on you like black cigars, and the streamlined bullets streaming from the Bren machine-guns. Not that that worries me particularly. I'm too old to fight. There'll be air-raids, of course, but they won't hit everybody. Besides, even if that kind of danger exists, it doesn't really enter into one's thoughts beforehand. As I've said several times already, I'm not frightened of the war, only the after-war. And even that isn't likely to affect me personally. Because who'd bother about a chap like me? I'm too fat to be a political suspect. No one would bump me off or cosh me with a rubber truncheon. I'm the ordinary middling kind that moves on when the policeman tells him. As for Hilda and the kids, they'd probably never notice the difference. And yet it frightens me. The barbed wire! The slogans! The enormous faces! The cork-lined cellars where the executioner plugs you from behind! For that matter it frightens other chaps who are intellectually a good deal dumber than I am. But why! Because it means good-bye to this thing I've been telling you about, this special feeling inside you. Call it peace, if you like. But when I say peace I don't mean absence of war, I mean peace, a feeling in your guts. And

it's gone for ever if the rubber truncheon boys get hold of us.

I picked up my bunch of primroses and had a smell at them. I was thinking of Lower Binfield. It was funny how for two months past it had been in and out of my mind all the time, after twenty years during which I'd practically forgotten it. And just at this moment there was the zoom of a car coming up the road.

It brought me up with a kind of jolt. I suddenly realised what I was doing—wandering round picking primroses when I ought to have been going through the inventory at that ironmonger's shop in Pudley. What was more, it suddenly struck me what I'd look like if those people in the car saw me. A fat man in a bowler hat holding a bunch of primroses! It wouldn't look right at all. Fat men mustn't pick primroses, at any rate in public. I just had time to chuck them over the hedge before the car came in sight. It was a good job I'd done so. The car was full of young fools of about twenty. How they'd have sniggered if they'd seen me! They were all looking at me—you know how people look at you when they're in a car coming towards you—and the thought struck me that even now they might somehow guess what I'd been doing. Better let 'em think it was something else. Why should a chap get out of his car at the side of a country road? Obvious! As the car went past I pretended to be doing up a fly-button.

I cranked up the car (the self-starter doesn't work any longer) and got in. Curiously enough, in the very moment when I was doing up the fly-button, when my mind was about three-quarters full of those young fools in the other car, a wonderful idea had occurred to me.

I'd go back to Lower Binfield!

Why not? I thought as I jammed her into top gear. Why

shouldn't I?What was to stop me?And why the hell hadn't I thought of it before?A quiet holiday in Lower Binfield—just the thing I wanted.

Don't imagine that I had any ideas of going back to LIVE in Lower Binfield.I wasn't planning to desert Hilda and the kids and start life under a different name.That kind of thing only happens in books.But what was to stop me slipping down to Lower Binfield and having a week there all by myself,on the Q.T.?

I seemed to have it all planned out in my mind already.It was all right as far as the money went.There was still twelve quid left in that secret pile of mine,and you can have a very comfortable week on twelve quid.I get a fortnight's holiday a year,generally in August or September.But if I made up some suitable story—relative dying of incurable disease,or something—I could probably get the firm to give me my holiday in two separate halves.Then I could have a week all to myself before Hilda knew what was happening.A week in Lower Binfield,with no Hilda,no kids,no Flying Salamander,no Ellesmere Road,no rumpus about the hire-purchase payments,no noise of traffic driving you silly—just a week of loafing round and listening to the quietness?

But why did I want to go back to Lower Binfield?you say.Why Lower Binfield in particular?What did I mean to do when I got there?

I didn't mean to do anything.That was part of the point.I wanted peace and quiet.Peace!We had it once,in Lower Binfield.I've told you something about our old life there,before the war.I'm not pretending it was perfect.I dare say it was a dull,sluggish,vegetable kind of life.You can say we were like turnips,if you like.But turnips don't live in terror of the boss,they don't lie awake at night thinking

about the next slump and the next war. We had peace inside us. Of course I knew that even in Lower Binfield life would have changed. But the place itself wouldn't have. There'd still be the beech woods round Binfield House, and the towpath down by Burford Weir, and the horse-trough in the market-place. I wanted to get back there, just for a week, and let the feeling of it soak into me. It was a bit like one of these Eastern sages retiring into a desert. And I should think, the way things are going, there'll be a good many people retiring into the desert during the next few years. It'll be like the time in ancient Rome that old Porteous was telling me about, when there were so many hermits that there was a waiting list for every cave.

But it wasn't that I wanted to watch my navel. I only wanted to get my nerve back before the bad times begin. Because does anyone who isn't dead from the neck up doubt that there's a bad time coming? We don't even know what it'll be, and yet we know it's coming. Perhaps a war, perhaps a slump—no knowing, except that it'll be something bad. Wherever we're going, we're going downwards. Into the grave, into the cesspool—no knowing. And you can't face that kind of thing unless you've got the right feeling inside you. There's something that's gone out of us in these twenty years since the war. It's a kind of vital juice that we've squirted away until there's nothing left. All this rushing to and fro! Everlasting scramble for a bit of cash. Everlasting din of buses, bombs, radios, telephone bells. Nerves worn all to bits, empty places in our bones where the marrow ought to be.

I shoved my foot down on the accelerator. The very thought of going back to Lower Binfield had done me good already. You know the feeling I had. Coming up for air! Like the big sea-turtles when they come paddling up to the surface, stick their noses out and fill their lungs with a great gulp before they sink down again among

the seaweed and the octopuses. We're all stifling at the bottom of a dustbin, but I'd found the way to the top. Back to Lower Binfield! I kept my foot on the accelerator until the old car worked up to her maximum speed of nearly forty miles an hour. She was rattling like a tin tray full of crockery, and under cover of the noise I nearly started singing.

Of course the fly in the milk-jug was Hilda. That thought pulled me up a bit. I slowed down to about twenty to think it over.

There wasn't much doubt Hilda would find out sooner or later. As to getting only a week's holiday in August, I might be able to pass that off all right. I could tell her the firm were only giving me a week this year. Probably she wouldn't ask too many questions about that, because she'd jump at the chance of cutting down the holiday expenses. The kids, in any case, always stay at the seaside for a month. Where the difficulty came in was finding an alibi for that week in May. I couldn't just clear off without notice. Best thing, I thought, would be to tell her a good while ahead that I was being sent on some special job to Nottingham, or Derby, or Bristol, or some other place a good long way away. If I told her about it two months ahead it would look as if I hadn't anything to hide.

But of course she'd find out sooner or later. Trust Hilda! She'd start off by pretending to believe it, and then, in that quiet, obstinate way she has, she'd nose out the fact that I'd never been to Nottingham or Derby or Bristol or wherever it might be. It's astonishing how she does it. Such perseverance! She lies low till she's found out all the weak points in your alibi, and then suddenly, when you've put your foot in it by some careless remark, she starts on you. Suddenly comes out with the whole dossier of the case. 'Where did you spend Saturday night?' That's a lie! You've been off with a woman. Look at these hairs I found when I was brushing your

waistcoat.Look at them!Is my hair that colour?'And then the fun begins.Lord knows how many times it's happened.Sometimes she's been right about the woman and sometimes she's been wrong,but the after-effects are always the same.Nagging for weeks on end! Never a meal without a row—and the kids can't make out what it's all about.The one completely hopeless thing would be to tell her just where I'd spent that week,and why.If I explained till the Day of Judgment she'd never believe that.

But,hell!I thought,why bother?It was a long way off.You know how different these things seem before and after.I shoved my foot down on the accelerator again.I'd had another idea,almost bigger than the first.I wouldn't go in May.I'd go in the second half of June,when the coarse-fishing season had started,and I'd go fishing!

Why not,after all?I wanted peace,and fishing is peace.And then the biggest idea of all came into my head and very nearly made me swing the car off the road.

I'd go and catch those big carp in the pool at Binfield House!

And once again,why not?Isn't it queer how we go through life,always thinking that the things we want to do are the things that can't be done?Why shouldn't I catch those carp?And yet,as soon as the idea's mentioned,doesn't it sound to you like something impossible,something that just couldn't happen?It seemed so to me,even at that moment.It seemed to me a kind of dope-dream,like the ones you have of sleeping with film stars or winning the heavyweight championship.And yet it wasn't in the least impossible,it wasn't even improbable.Fishing can be rented.Whoever owned Binfield House now would probably let the pool if they got enough for it.And Gosh!I'd be glad to pay five pounds for a day's fishing in that pool.For that matter it was quite

likely that the house was still empty and nobody even knew that the pool existed.

I thought of it in the dark place among the trees, waiting for me all those years. And the huge black fish still gliding round it. Jesus! If they were that size thirty years ago, what would they be like now?

3

It was June the seventeenth, Friday, the second day of the coarse-fishing season.

I hadn't had any difficulty in fixing things with the firm. As for Hilda, I'd fitted her up with a story that was all shipshape and watertight. I'd fixed on Birmingham for my alibi, and at the last moment I'd even told her the name of the hotel I was going to stay at, Rowbottom's Family and Commercial. I happened to know the address because I'd stayed there some years earlier. At the same time I didn't want her writing to me at Birmingham, which she might do if I was away as long as a week. After thinking it over I took young Saunders, who travels for Glisso Floor Polish, partly into my confidence. He'd happened to mention that he'd be passing through Birmingham on the eighteenth of June, and I got him to promise that he'd stop on his way and post a letter from me to Hilda, addressed from Rowbottom's. This was to tell her that I might be called away and she'd better not write. Saunders understood, or thought he did. He gave me a wink and said I was wonderful for my age. So that settled Hilda. She hadn't asked any questions, and even if she turned suspicious later, an alibi like that would take some breaking.

I drove through Westerham. It was a wonderful June morning. A faint breeze blowing, and the elm tops swaying in the sun, little white clouds streaming across the sky like a flock of sheep, and the

shadows chasing each other across the fields.Outside Westerham a Walls'Ice Cream lad,with cheeks like apples,came tearing towards me on his bike,whistling so that it went through your head.It suddenly reminded me of the time when I'd been an errand boy myself(though in those days we didn't have free-wheel bikes)and I very nearly stopped him and took one.They'd cut the hay in places,but they hadn't got it in yet.It lay drying in long shiny rows,and the smell of it drifted across the road and got mixed up with the petrol.

I drove along at a gentle fifteen.The morning had a kind of peaceful,dreamy feeling.The ducks floated about on the ponds as if they felt too satisfied to eat.In Nettlefield,the village beyond Westerham,a little man in a white apron,with grey hair and a huge grey moustache,darted across the green,planted himself in the middle of the road and began doing physical jerks to attract my attention.My car's known all along this road,of course.I pulled up.It's only Mr.Weaver,who keeps the village general shop.No,he doesn't want to insure his life,nor his shop either.He's merely run out of change and wants to know whether I've got a quid's worth of'large silver'.They never have any change in Nettlefield,not even at the pub.

I drove on.The wheat would have been as tall as your waist.It went undulating up and down the hills like a great green carpet,with the wind rippling it a little,kind of thick and silky-looking.It's like a woman,I thought.It makes you want to lie on it.And a bit ahead of me I saw the sign-post where the road forks right for Pudley and left for Oxford.

I was still on my usual beat,inside the boundary of my own'district',as the firm calls it.The natural thing,as I was going westward,would have been to leave London along the Uxbridge

Road. But by a kind of instinct I'd followed my usual route. The fact was I was feeling guilty about the whole business. I wanted to get well away before I headed for Oxfordshire. And in spite of the fact that I'd fixed things so neatly with Hilda and the firm, in spite of the twelve quid in my pocket-book and the suitcase in the back of the car, as I got nearer the crossroads I actually felt a temptation—I knew I wasn't going to succumb to it, and yet it was a temptation—to chuck the whole thing up. I had a sort of feeling that so long as I was driving along my normal beat I was still inside the law. It's not too late, I thought. There's still time to do the respectable thing. I could run into Pudley, for instance, see the manager of Barclay's Bank (he's our agent at Pudley) and find out if any new business had come in. For that matter I could even turn round, go back to Hilda, and make a clean breast of the plot.

I slowed down as I got to the corner. Should I or shouldn't I? For about a second I was really tempted. But no! I tooted the klaxon and swung the car westward, on to the Oxford road.

Well, I'd done it. I was on the forbidden ground. It was true that five miles farther on, if I wanted to, I could turn to the left again and get back to Westerham. But for the moment I was headed westward. Strictly speaking I was in flight. And what was curious, I was no sooner on the Oxford road than I felt perfectly certain that THEY knew all about it. When I say THEY I mean all the people who wouldn't approve of a trip of this kind and who'd have stopped me if they could—which, I suppose, would include pretty well everybody.

What was more, I actually had a feeling that they were after me already. The whole lot of them! All the people who couldn't understand why a middle-aged man with false teeth should sneak away for a quiet week in the place where he spent his boyhood. And

all the mean-minded bastards who COULD understand only too well, and who'd raise heaven and earth to prevent it. They were all on my track. It was as if a huge army were streaming up the road behind me. I seemed to see them in my mind's eye. Hilda was in front, of course, with the kids tagging after her, and Mrs. Wheeler driving her forward with a grim, vindictive expression, and Miss Minns rushing along in the rear, with her pince-nez slipping down and a look of distress on her face, like the hen that gets left behind when the others have got hold of the bacon rind. And Sir Herbert Crum and the higher-ups of the Flying Salamander in their Rolls-Royces and Hispano-Suizas. And all the chaps at the office, and all the poor down-trodden pen-pushers from Ellesmere Road and from all such other roads, some of them wheeling prams and mowing-machines and concrete garden-rollers, some of them chugging along in little Austin Sevens. And all the soul-savers and Nosey Parkers, the people whom you've never seen but who rule your destiny all the same, the Home Secretary, Scotland Yard, the Temperance League, the Bank of England, Lord Beaverbrook, Hitler and Stalin on a tandem bicycle, the bench of Bishops, Mussolini, the Pope—they were all of them after me. I could almost hear them shouting:

"There's a chap who thinks he's going to escape! There's a chap who says he won't be streamlined! He's going back to Lower Binfield! After him! Stop him!"

It's queer. The impression was so strong that I actually took a peep through the little window at the back of the car to make sure I wasn't being followed. Guilty conscience, I suppose. But there was nobody. Only the dusty white road and the long line of the elms dwindling out behind me.

I trod on the gas and the old car rattled into the thirties. A few minutes later I was past the Westerham turning. So that was that. I'd

burnt my boats. This was the idea which, in a dim sort of way, had begun to form itself in my mind the day I got my new false teeth.

Part IV

1

I came towards Lower Binfield over Chamford Hill. There are four roads into Lower Binfield, and it would have been more direct to go through Walton. But I'd wanted to come over Chamford Hill, the way we used to go when we biked home from fishing in the Thames. When you get just past the crown of the hill the trees open out and you can see Lower Binfield lying in the valley below you.

It's a queer experience to go over a bit of country you haven't seen in twenty years. You remember it in great detail, and you remember it all wrong. All the distances are different, and the landmarks seem to have moved about. You keep feeling, surely this hill used to be a lot steeper—surely that turning was on the other side of the road? And on the other hand you'll have memories which are perfectly accurate, but which only belong to one particular occasion. You'll remember, for instance, a corner of a field, on a wet day in winter, with the grass so green that it's almost blue, and a rotten gatepost covered with lichen and a cow standing in the grass and looking at you. And you'll go back after twenty years and be surprised because the cow isn't standing in the same place and looking at you with the same expression.

As I drove up Chamford Hill I realised that the picture I'd had of it in my mind was almost entirely imaginary. But it was a fact that certain things had changed. The road was tarmac, whereas in the old days it used to be macadam (I remember the bumpy feeling of it under the bike), and it seemed to have got a lot wider. And

there were far less trees. In the old days there used to be huge beeches growing in the hedgerows, and in places their boughs met across the road and made a kind of arch. Now they were all gone. I'd nearly got to the top of the hill when I came on something which was certainly new. To the right of the road there was a whole lot of fake-picturesque houses, with overhanging eaves and rose pergolas and what-not. You know the kind of houses that are just a little too high-class to stand in a row, and so they're dotted about in a kind of colony, with private roads leading up to them. And at the entrance to one of the private roads there was a huge white board which said:

THE KENNELS

PEDIGREE SEALYHAM PUPS

DOGS BOARDED

Surely THAT usen't to be there?

I thought for a moment. Yes, I remembered! Where those houses stood there used to be a little oak plantation, and the trees grew too close together, so that they were very tall and thin, and in spring the ground underneath them used to be smothered in anemones. Certainly there were never any houses as far out of the town as this.

I got to the top of the hill. Another minute and Lower Binfield would be in sight. Lower Binfield! Why should I pretend I wasn't excited? At the very thought of seeing it again an extraordinary feeling that started in my guts crept upwards and did something to my heart. Five seconds more and I'd be seeing it. Yes, here we are! I declutched, trod on the foot-brake, and—Jesus!

Oh, yes, I know you knew what was coming. But I didn't. You can

say I was a bloody fool not to expect it, and so I was. But it hadn't even occurred to me.

The first question was, where WAS Lower Binfield?

I don't mean that it had been demolished. It had merely been swallowed. The thing I was looking down at was a good-sized manufacturing town. I remember—Gosh, how I remember! and in this case I don't think my memory is far out—what Lower Binfield used to look like from the top of Chamford Hill. I suppose the High Street was about a quarter of a mile long, and except for a few outlying houses the town was roughly the shape of a cross. The chief landmarks were the church tower and the chimney of the brewery. At this moment I couldn't distinguish either of them. All I could see was an enormous river of brand-new houses which flowed along the valley in both directions and half-way up the hills on either side. Over to the right there were what looked like several acres of bright red roofs all exactly alike. A big Council housing estate, by the look of it.

But where was Lower Binfield? Where was the town I used to know? It might have been anywhere. All I knew was that it was buried somewhere in the middle of that sea of bricks. Of the five or six factory chimneys that I could see, I couldn't even make a guess at which belonged to the brewery. Towards the eastern end of the town there were two enormous factories of glass and concrete. That accounts for the growth of the town, I thought, as I began to take it in. It occurred to me that the population of this place (it used to be about two thousand in the old days) must be a good twenty-five thousand. The only thing that hadn't changed, seemingly, was Binfield House. It wasn't much more than a dot at that distance, but you could see it on the hillside opposite, with the beech trees round it, and the town hadn't climbed that high. As I looked a fleet of black

bombing planes came over the hill and zoomed across the town.

I shoved the clutch in and started slowly down the hill. The houses had climbed half-way up it. You know those very cheap small houses which run up a hillside in one continuous row, with the roofs rising one above the other like a flight of steps, all exactly the same. But a little before I got to the houses I stopped again. On the left of the road there was something else that was quite new. The cemetery. I stopped opposite the lych-gate to have a look at it.

It was enormous, twenty acres, I should think. There's always a kind of jumped-up unhomelike look about a new cemetery, with its raw gravel paths and its rough green sods, and the machine-made marble angels that look like something off a wedding-cake. But what chiefly struck me at the moment was that in the old days this place hadn't existed. There was no separate cemetery then, only the churchyard. I could vaguely remember the farmer these fields used to belong to—Blackett, his name was, and he was a dairy-farmer. And somehow the raw look of the place brought it home to me how things have changed. It wasn't only that the town had grown so vast that they needed twenty acres to dump their corpses in. It was their putting the cemetery out here, on the edge of the town. Have you noticed that they always do that nowadays? Every new town puts its cemetery on the outskirts. Shove it away—keep it out of sight! Can't bear to be reminded of death. Even the tombstones tell you the same story. They never say that the chap underneath them 'died', it's always 'passed away' or 'fell asleep'. It wasn't so in the old days. We had our churchyard plumb in the middle of the town, you passed it every day, you saw the spot where your grandfather was lying and where some day you were going to lie yourself. We didn't mind looking at the dead. In hot weather, I admit, we also had to smell them, because some of the family vaults weren't too well sealed.

I let the car run down the hill slowly. Queer! You can't imagine how queer! All the way down the hill I was seeing ghosts, chiefly the ghosts of hedges and trees and cows. It was as if I was looking at two worlds at once, a kind of thin bubble of the thing that used to be, with the thing that actually existed shining through it. There's the field where the bull chased Ginger Rogers! And there's the place where the horse-mushrooms used to grow! But there weren't any fields or any bulls or any mushrooms. It was houses, houses everywhere, little raw red houses with their grubby window-curtains and their scraps of back-garden that hadn't anything in them except a patch of rank grass or a few larkspurs struggling among the weeds. And blokes walking up and down, and women shaking out mats, and snotty-nosed kids playing along the pavement. All strangers! They'd all come crowding in while my back was turned. And yet it was they who'd have looked on me as a stranger, they didn't know anything about the old Lower Binfield, they'd never heard of Shooter and Wetherall, or Mr. Grimmett and Uncle Ezekiel, and cared less, you bet.

It's funny how quickly one adjusts. I suppose it was five minutes since I'd halted at the top of the hill, actually a bit out of breath at the thought of seeing Lower Binfield again. And already I'd got used to the idea that Lower Binfield had been swallowed up and buried like the lost cities of Peru. I braced up and faced it. After all, what else do you expect? Towns have got to grow, people have got to live somewhere. Besides, the old town hadn't been annihilated. Somewhere or other it still existed, though it had houses round it instead of fields. In a few minutes I'd be seeing it again, the church and the brewery chimney and Father's shop-window and the horse-trough in the market-place. I got to the bottom of the hill, and the road forked. I took the left-hand turning, and a minute later I was lost.

I could remember nothing. I couldn't even remember whether it was hereabouts that the town used to begin. All I knew was that in the old days this street hadn't existed. For hundreds of yards I was running along it—a rather mean, shabby kind of street, with the houses giving straight on the pavement and here and there a corner grocery or a dingy little pub—and wondering where the hell it led to. Finally I pulled up beside a woman in a dirty apron and no hat who was walking down the pavement. I stuck my head out of the window.

'Beg pardon—can you tell me the way to the market-place?'

She 'couldn't tell'. Answered in an accent you could cut with a spade. Lancashire. There's lots of them in the south of England now. Overflow from the distressed areas. Then I saw a bloke in overalls with a bag of tools coming along and tried again. This time I got the answer in Cockney, but he had to think for a moment.

'Market-place? Market-place? Lessee, now. Oh—you mean the OLE Market?'

I supposed I did mean the Old Market.

'Oh, well—you take the right' and turning—'

It was a long way. Miles, it seemed to me, though really it wasn't a mile. Houses, shops, cinemas, chapels, football grounds—new, all new. Again I had that feeling of a kind of enemy invasion having happened behind my back. All these people flooding in from Lancashire and the London suburbs, planting themselves down in this beastly chaos, not even bothering to know the chief landmarks of the town by name. But I grasped presently why what we used to call the market-place was now known as the Old Market. There was a big square, though you couldn't properly call it a square, because it

was no particular shape,in the middle of the new town,with traffic-lights and a huge bronze statue of a lion worrying an eagle—the war-memorial,I suppose.And the newness of everything!The raw,mean look!Do you know the look of these new towns that have suddenly swelled up like balloons in the last few years,Hayes,Slough,Dagenham,and so forth?The kind of chilliness,the bright red brick everywhere,the temporary-looking shop-windows full of cut-price chocolates and radio parts.It was just like that.But suddenly I swung into a street with older houses.Gosh! The High Street!

After all my memory hadn't played tricks on me.I knew every inch of it now.Another couple of hundred yards and I'd be in the market-place.The old shop was down the other end of the High Street.I'd go there after lunch—I was going to put up at the George.And every inch a memory!I knew all the shops,though all the names had changed,and the stuff they dealt in had mostly changed as well.There's Lovegrove's!And there's Todd's!And a big dark shop with beams and dormer windows.Used to be Lilywhite's the draper's,where Elsie used to work.And Grimmett's!Still a grocer's apparently.Now for the horse-trough in the market-place.There was another car ahead of me and I couldn't see.

It turned aside as we got into the market-place.The horse-trough was gone.

There was an A.A.man on traffic-duty where it used to stand.He gave a glance at the car,saw that it hadn't the A.A.sign,and decided not to salute.

I turned the corner and ran down to the George.The horse-trough being gone had thrown me out to such an extent that I hadn't even looked to see whether the brewery chimney was still

standing. The George had altered too, all except the name. The front had been dolled up till it looked like one of those riverside hotels, and the sign was different. It was curious that although till that moment I hadn't thought of it once in twenty years, I suddenly found that I could remember every detail of the old sign, which had swung there ever since I could remember. It was a crude kind of picture, with St. George on a very thin horse trampling on a very fat dragon, and in the corner, though it was cracked and faded, you could read the little signature, 'Wm. Sandford, Painter & Carpenter'. The new sign was kind of artistic-looking. You could see it had been painted by a real artist. St. George looked a regular pansy. The cobbled yard, where the farmers' traps used to stand and the drunks used to puke on Saturday nights, had been enlarged to about three times its size and concreted over, with garages all round it. I backed the car into one of the garages and got out.

One thing I've noticed about the human mind is that it goes in jerks. There's no emotion that stays by you for any length of time. During the last quarter of an hour I'd had what you could fairly describe as a shock. I'd felt it almost like a sock in the guts when I stopped at the top of Chamford Hill and suddenly realised that Lower Binfield had vanished, and there'd been another little stab when I saw the horse-trough was gone. I'd driven through the streets with a gloomy, Ichabod kind of feeling. But as I stepped out of the car and hitched my trilby hat on to my head I suddenly felt that it didn't matter a damn. It was such a lovely sunny day, and the hotel yard had a kind of summery look, with its flowers in green tubs and what-not. Besides, I was hungry and looking forward to a spot of lunch.

I strolled into the hotel with a consequential kind of air, with the boots, who'd already nipped out to meet me, following with the suitcase. I felt pretty prosperous, and probably I looked it. A solid

business man,you'd have said,at any rate if you hadn't seen the car.I was glad I'd come in my new suit—blue flannel with a thin white stripe,which suits my style.It has what the tailor calls a'reducing effect'.I believe that day I could have passed for a stockbroker.And say what you like it's a very pleasant thing,on a June day when the sun's shining on the pink geraniums in the window-boxes,to walk into a nice country hotel with roast lamb and mint sauce ahead of you.Not that it's any treat to me to stay in hotels,Lord knows I see all too much of them—but ninety-nine times out of a hundred it's those godless'family and commercial'hotels,like Rowbottom's,where I was supposed to be staying at present,the kind of places where you pay five bob for bed and breakfast,and the sheets are always damp and the bath taps never work.The George had got so smart I wouldn't have known it.In the old days it had hardly been a hotel,only a pub,though it had a room or two to let and used to do a farmers'lunch(roast beef and Yorkshire,suet dumpling and Stilton cheese)on market days.It all seemed different except for the public bar,which I got a glimpse of as I went past,and which looked the same as ever.I went up a passage with a soft carpet,and hunting prints and copper warming-pans and such-like junk hanging on the walls.And dimly I could remember the passage as it used to be,the hollowed-out flags underfoot,and the smell of plaster mixed up with the smell of beer.A smart-looking young woman,with frizzed hair and a black dress,who I suppose was the clerk or something,took my name at the office.

'You wish for a room,sir?Certainly,sir.What name shall I put down,sir?'

I paused.After all,this was my big moment.She'd be pretty sure to know the name.It isn't common,and there are a lot of us in the churchyard.We were one of the old Lower Binfield families,the Bowlings of Lower Binfield.And though in a way it's painful to be

recognised,I'd been rather looking forward to it.

'Bowling,I said very distinctly.'Mr.George Bowling.'

'Bowling,sir.B-O-A—oh!B-O-W?Yes,sir.And you are coming from London,sir?'

No response.Nothing registered.She'd never heard of me.Never heard of George Bowling,son of Samuel Bowling—Samuel Bowling who,damn it!had had his half-pint in this same pub every Saturday for over thirty years.

2

The dining-room had changed,too.

I could remember the old room,though I'd never had a meal there,with its brown mantelpiece and its bronzy-yellow wallpaper—I never knew whether it was meant to be that colour,or had just got like that from age and smoke—and the oil-painting,also by Wm.Sandford,Painter & Carpenter,of the battle of Tel-el-Kebir.Now they'd got the place up in a kind of medieval style.Brick fireplace with inglenooks,a huge beam across the ceiling,oak panelling on the walls,and every bit of it a fake that you could have spotted fifty yards away.The beam was genuine oak,came out of some old sailing-ship,probably,but it didn't hold anything up,and I had my suspicions of the panels as soon as I set eyes on them.As I sat down at my table,and the slick young waiter came towards me fiddling with his napkin,I tapped the wall behind me.Yes!Thought so!Not even wood.They fake it up with some kind of composition and then paint it over.

But the lunch wasn't bad.I had my lamb and mint sauce,and I had a bottle of some white wine or other with a French name which

made me belch a bit but made me feel happy. There was one other person lunching there, a woman of about thirty with fair hair, looked like a widow. I wondered whether she was staying at the George, and made vague plans to get off with her. It's funny how your feelings get mixed up. Half the time I was seeing ghosts. The past was sticking out into the present, Market day, and the great solid farmers throwing their legs under the long table, with their hobnails grating on the stone floor, and working their way through a quantity of beef and dumpling you wouldn't believe the human frame could hold. And then the little tables with their shiny white cloths and wine-glasses and folded napkins, and the faked-up decorations and the general expensiveness would blot it out again. And I'd think, 'I've got twelve quid and a new suit. I'm little Georgie Bowling, and who'd have believed I'd ever come back to Lower Binfield in my own motorcar?' And then the wine would send a kind of warm feeling upwards from my stomach, and I'd run an eye over the woman with fair hair and mentally take her clothes off.

It was the same in the afternoon as I lay about in the lounge—fake-medieval again, but it had stream-lined leather armchairs and glass-topped tables—with some brandy and a cigar. I was seeing ghosts, but on the whole I was enjoying it. As a matter of fact I was a tiny bit boozed and hoping that the woman with fair hair would come in so that I could scrape acquaintance. She never showed up, however. It wasn't till nearly tea-time that I went out.

I strolled up to the market-place and turned to the left. The shop! It was funny. Twenty-one years ago, the day of Mother's funeral, I'd passed it in the station fly, and seen it all shut up and dusty, with the sign burnt off with a plumber's blowflame, and I hadn't cared a damn. And now, when I was so much further away from it, when there were actually details about the inside of the house that I couldn't remember, the thought of seeing it again did

things to my heart and guts.I passed the barber's shop.Still a barber's,though the name was different.A warm,soapy,almondy smell came out of the door.Not quite so good as the old smell of bay rum and latakia.The shop—our shop—was twenty yards farther down.Ah!

An arty-looking sign—painted by the same chap as did the one at the George,I shouldn't wonder—hanging out over the pavement:

WENDY'S TEASHOP

MORNING COFFEE

HOME-MADE CAKES

A tea-shop!

I suppose if it had been a butcher's or an ironmonger's,or anything else except a seedsman's,it would have given me the same kind of jolt.It's absurd that because you happen to have been born in a certain house you should feel that you've got rights over it for the rest of your life,but so you do.The place lived up to its name,all right.Blue curtains in the window,and a cake or two standing about,the kind of cake that's covered with chocolate and has just one walnut stuck somewhere on the top.I went in.I didn't really want any tea,but I had to see the inside.

They'd evidently turned both the shop and what used to be the parlour into tea-rooms.As for the yard at the back where the dustbin used to stand and Father's little patch of weeds used to grow,they'd paved it all over and dolled it up with rustic tables and hydrangeas and things.I went through into the parlour.More ghosts! The piano and the texts on the wall,and the two lumpy old red armchairs where Father and Mother used to sit on opposite sides of

the fireplace,reading the People and the News of the World on Sunday afternoons!They'd got the place up in an even more antique style than the George,with gateleg tables and a hammered-iron chandelier and pewter plates hanging on the wall and what-not.Do you notice how dark they always manage to make it in these arty tea-rooms?It's part of the antiqueness,I suppose.And instead of an ordinary waitress there was a young woman in a kind of print wrapper who met me with a sour expression.I asked her for tea,and she was ten minutes getting it.You know the kind of tea—China tea,so weak that you could think it's water till you put the milk in.I was sitting almost exactly where Father's armchair used to stand.I could almost hear his voice,reading out a'piece',as he used to call it,from the People,about the new flying machines,or the chap who was swallowed by a whale,or something.It gave me a most peculiar feeling that I was there on false pretences and they could kick me out if they discovered who I was,and yet simultaneously I had a kind of longing to tell somebody that I'd been born here,that I belonged to this house,or rather(what I really felt)that the house belonged to me.There was nobody else having tea.The girl in the print wrapper was hanging about by the window,and I could see that if I hadn't been there she'd have been picking her teeth.I bit into one of the slices of cake she'd brought me.Home-made cakes! You bet they were.Home-made with margarine and egg-substitute.But in the end I had to speak.I said:

'Have you been in Lower Binfield long?'

She started,looked surprised,and didn't answer.I tried again:

'I used to live in Lower Binfield myself,a good while ago.'

Again no answer,or only something that I couldn't hear.She gave me a kind of frigid look and then gazed out of the window

again. I saw how it was. Too much of a lady to go in for back-chat with customers. Besides, she probably thought I was trying to get off with her. What was the good of telling her I'd been born in the house? Even if she believed it, it wouldn't interest her. She'd never heard of Samuel Bowling, Corn & Seed Merchant. I paid the bill and cleared out.

I wandered up to the church. One thing that I'd been half afraid of, and half looking forward to, was being recognised by people I used to know. But I needn't have worried, there wasn't a face I knew anywhere in the streets. It seemed as if the whole town had got a new population.

When I got to the church I saw why they'd had to have a new cemetery. The churchyard was full to the brim, and half the graves had names on them that I didn't know. But the names I did know were easy enough to find. I wandered round among the graves. The sexton had just scythed the grass and there was a smell of summer even there. They were all alone, all the older folks I'd known. Gravitt the butcher, and Winkle the other seedsman, and Trew, who used to keep the George, and Mrs. Wheeler from the sweet-shop—they were all lying there. Shooter and Wetherall were opposite one another on either side of the path, just as if they were still singing at each other across the aisle. So Wetherall hadn't got his hundred after all. Born in '43 and departed his life in 1928. But he'd beaten Shooter, as usual. Shooter died in '26. What a time old Wetherall must have had those last two years when there was nobody to sing against him! And old Grimmitt under a huge marble thing shaped rather like a veal-and-ham pie, with an iron railing round it, and in the corner a whole batch of Simmonses under cheap little crosses. All gone to dust. Old Hodges with his tobacco-coloured teeth, and Lovegrove with his big brown beard, and Lady Rampling with the coachman and the tiger, and Harry Barnes's aunt who had a glass eye, and

Brewer of the Mill Farm with his wicked old face like something carved out of a nut—nothing left of any of them except a slab of stone and God knows what underneath.

I found Mother's grave, and Father's beside it. Both of them in pretty good repair. The sexton had kept the grass clipped. Uncle Ezekiel's was a little way away. They'd levelled a lot of the older graves, and the old wooden head-pieces, the ones that used to look like the end of a bedstead, had all been cleared away. What do you feel when you see your parents' graves after twenty years? I don't know what you ought to feel, but I'll tell you what I did feel, and that was nothing. Father and Mother have never faded out of my mind. It's as if they existed somewhere or other in a kind of eternity, Mother behind the brown teapot, Father with his bald head a little mealy, and his spectacles and his grey moustache, fixed for ever like people in a picture, and yet in some way alive. Those boxes of bones lying in the ground there didn't seem to have anything to do with them. Merely, as I stood there, I began to wonder what you feel like when you're underground, whether you care much and how soon you cease to care, when suddenly a heavy shadow swept across me and gave me a bit of a start.

I looked over my shoulder. It was only a bombing plane which had flown between me and the sun. The place seemed to be creeping with them.

I strolled into the church. For almost the first time since I got back to Lower Binfield I didn't have the ghostly feeling, or rather I had it in a different form. Because nothing had changed. Nothing, except that all the people were gone. Even the hassocks looked the same. The same dusty, sweetish corpse-smell. And by God! the same hole in the window, though, as it was evening and the sun was round the other side, the spot of light

wasn't creeping up the aisle.They'd still got pews—hadn't changed over to chairs.There was our pew,and there was the one in front where Wetherall used to bellow against Shooter.Sihon king of the Amorites and Og the king of Bashan!And the worn stones in the aisle where you could still half-read the epitaphs of the blokes who lay beneath them.I squatted down to have a look at the one opposite our pew.I still knew the readable bits of it by heart.Even the pattern they made seemed to have stuck in my memory.Lord knows how often I'd read them during the sermon.

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I remembered how the long S's used to puzzle me as a kid.Used to wonder whether in the old days they pronounced their S's as F's,and if so,why.

There was a step behind me.I looked up.A chap in a cassock was standing over me.It was the vicar.

But I mean THE vicar! It was old Betterton, who'd been vicar in the old days—not, as a matter of fact, ever since I could remember, but since 1904 or thereabouts. I recognised him at once, though his hair was quite white.

He didn't recognise me. I was only a fat tripper in a blue suit doing a bit of sightseeing. He said good evening and promptly started on the usual line of talk—was I interested in architecture, remarkable old building this, foundations go back to Saxon times and so on and so forth. And soon he was doddering round, showing me the sights, such as they were—Norman arch leading into the vestry, brass effigy of Sir Roderick Bone who was killed at the Battle of Newbury. And I followed him with the kind of whipped-dog air that middle-aged businessmen always have when they're being shown round a church or a picture-gallery. But did I tell him that I knew it all already? Did I tell him that I was Georgie Bowling, son of Samuel Bowling—he'd have remembered my father even if he didn't remember me—and that I'd not only listened to his sermons for ten years and gone to his Confirmation classes, but even belonged to the Lower Binfield Reading Circle and had a go at Sesame and Lilies just to please him? No, I didn't. I merely followed him round, making the kind of mumble that you make when somebody tells you that this or that is five hundred years old and you can't think what the hell to say except that it doesn't look it. From the moment that I set eyes on him I'd decided to let him think I was a stranger. As soon as I decently could I dropped sixpence in the Church Expenses box and bunked.

But why? Why not make contact, now that at last I'd found somebody I knew?

Because the change in his appearance after twenty years had actually frightened me. I suppose you think I mean that he looked

older. But he didn't! He looked YOUNGER. And it suddenly taught me something about the passage of time.

I suppose old Betterton would be about sixty-five now, so that when I last saw him he'd have been about forty-five—my own present age. His hair was white now, and the day he buried Mother it was a kind of streaky grey, like a shaving-brush. And yet as soon as I saw him the first thing that struck me was that he looked younger. I'd thought of him as an old, old man, and after all he wasn't so very old. As a boy, it occurred to me, all people over forty had seemed to me just worn-out old wrecks, so old that there was hardly any difference between them. A man of forty-five had seemed to me older than this old dodderer of sixty-five seemed now. And Christ! I was forty-five myself. It frightened me.

So that's what I look like to chaps of twenty, I thought as I made off between the graves. Just a poor old hulk. Finished. It was curious. As a rule I don't care a damn about my age. Why should I? I'm fat, but I'm strong and healthy. I can do everything I want to do. A rose smells the same to me now as it did when I was twenty. Ah, but do I smell the same to the rose? Like an answer a girl, might have been eighteen, came up the churchyard lane. She had to pass within a yard or two of me. I saw the look she gave me, just a tiny momentary look. No, not frightened, nor hostile. Only kind of wild, remote, like a wild animal when you catch its eye. She'd been born and grown up in those twenty years while I was away from Lower Binfield. All my memories would have been meaningless to her. Living in a different world from me, like an animal.

I went back to the George. I wanted a drink, but the bar didn't open for another half-hour. I hung about for a bit, reading a Sporting and Dramatic of the year before, and presently the fair-haired dame, the one I thought might be a widow, came in. I had a sudden

desperate yearning to get off with her.Wanted to show myself that there's life in the old dog yet,even if the old dog does have to wear false teeth.After all,I thought,if she's thirty and I'm forty-five,that's fair enough.I was standing in front of the empty fireplace,making believe to warm my bum,the way you do on a summer day.In my blue suit I didn't look so bad.A bit fat,no doubt,but distingue.A man of the world.I could pass for a stockbroker.I put on my toniest accent and said casually:

'Wonderful June weather we're having.'

It was a pretty harmless remark,wasn't it?Not in the same class as'Haven't I met you somewhere before?'

But it wasn't a success.She didn't answer,merely lowered for about half a second the paper she was reading and gave me a look that would have cracked a window.It was awful.She had one of those blue eyes that go into you like a bullet.In that split second I saw how hopelessly I'd got her wrong.She wasn't the kind of widow with dyed hair who likes being taken out to dance-halls.She was upper-middle-class,probably an admiral's daughter,and been to one of those good schools where they play hockey.And I'd got myself wrong too.New suit or no new suit,I COULDN't pass for a stockbroker.Merely looked like a commercial traveller who'd happened to get hold of a bit of dough.I sneaked off to the private bar to have a pint or two before dinner.

The beer wasn't the same.I remember the old beer,the good Thames Valley beer that used to have a bit of taste in it because it was made out of chalky water.I asked the barmaid:

'Have Bessemers'still got the brewery?'

'Bessemers?Oo,NO,sir!They've gorn.Oo,years ago—long before

we come'ere.'

She was a friendly sort, what I call the elder-sister type of barmaid, thirty-fivish, with a mild kind of face and the fat arms they develop from working the beer-handle. She told me the name of the combine that had taken over the brewery. I could have guessed it from the taste, as a matter of fact. The different bars ran round in a circle with compartments in between. Across in the public bar two chaps were playing a game of darts, and in the Jug and Bottle there was a chap I couldn't see who occasionally put in a remark in a sepulchral kind of voice. The barmaid leaned her fat elbows on the bar and had a talk with me. I ran over the names of the people I used to know, and there wasn't a single one of them that she'd heard of. She said she'd only been in Lower Binfield five years. She hadn't even heard of old Trew, who used to have the George in the old days.

'I used to live in Lower Binfield myself,' I told her. 'A good while back, it was, before the war.'

'Before the war? Well, now! You don't look that old.'

'See some changes, I dessay,' said the chap in the Jug and Bottle.

'The town's grown,' I said. 'It's the factories, I suppose.'

'Well, of course they mostly work at the factories. There's the gramophone works, and then there's Truefitt Stockings. But of course they're making bombs nowadays.'

I didn't altogether see why it was of course, but she began telling me about a young fellow who worked at Truefitt's factory and sometimes came to the George, and he'd told her that they were making bombs as well as stockings, the two, for some reason I didn't

understand,being easy to combine.And then she told me about the big military aerodrome near Walton—that accounted for the bombing planes I kept seeing—and the next moment we'd started talking about the war,as usual.Funny.It was exactly to escape the thought of war that I'd come here.But how can you,anyway?It's in the air you breathe.

I said it was coming in 1941.The chap in the Jug and Bottle said he reckoned it was a bad job.The barmaid said it gave her the creeps.She said:

'It don't seem to do much good,does it,after all said and done? And sometimes I lie awake at night and hear one of those great things going overhead,and I think to myself,“Well,now,suppose that was to drop a bomb right down on top of me!”And all this A.R.P.,and Miss Todgers,she's the Air Warden,telling you it'll be all right if you keep your head and stuff the windows up with newspaper,and they say they're going to dig a shelter under the Town Hall.But the way I look at it is,how could you put a gas-mask on a baby?'

The chap in the Jug and Bottle said he'd read in the paper that you ought to get into a hot bath till it was all over.The chaps in the public bar overheard this and there was a bit of by-play on the subject of how many people could get into the same bath,and both of them asked the barmaid if they could share her bath with her.She told them not to get saucy,and then she went up the other end of the bar and hauled them out a couple more pints of old and mild.I took a suck at my beer.It was poor stuff.Bitter,they call it.And it was bitter,right enough,too bitter,a kind of sulphurous taste.Chemicals.They say no English hops ever go into beer nowadays,they're all made into chemicals.Chemicals,on the other hand,are made into beer.I found myself thinking about Uncle

Ezekiel, what he'd have said to beer like this, and what he'd have said about A.R.P. and the buckets of sand you're supposed to put the thermite bombs out with. As the barmaid came back to my side of the bar I said:

'By the way, who's got the Hall nowadays?'

We always used to call it the Hall, though its name was Binfield House. For a moment she didn't seem to understand.

'The Hall, sir?'

'E means Binfield Ouse,' said the chap in the Jug and Bottle.

'Oh, Binfield House! Oo, I thought you meant the Memorial Hall. It's Dr. Merrall's got Binfield House now.'

'Dr. Merrall?'

'Yes, sir. He's got more than sixty patients up there, they say.'

'Patients? Have they turned it into a hospital, or something?'

'Well—it's not what you'd call an ordinary hospital. More of a sanatorium. It's mental patients, reely. What they call a Mental Home.'

A loony-bin!

But after all, what else could you expect?

3

I crawled out of bed with a bad taste in my mouth and my bones creaking.

The fact was that, what with a bottle of wine at lunch and

another at dinner, and several pints in between, besides a brandy or two, I'd had a bit too much to drink the day before. For several minutes I stood in the middle of the carpet, gazing at nothing in particular and too done-in to make a move. You know that god-awful feeling you get sometimes in the early morning. It's a feeling chiefly in your legs, but it says to you clearer than any words could do, 'Why the hell do you go on with it? Chuck it up, old chap! Stick your head in the gas oven!'

Then I shoved my teeth in and went to the window. A lovely June day, again, and the sun was just beginning to slant over the roofs and hit the house-fronts on the other side of the street. The pink geraniums in the window-boxes didn't look half bad. Although it was only about half past eight and this was only a side-street off the market-place there was quite a crowd of people coming and going. A stream of clerkly-looking chaps in dark suits with dispatch-cases were hurrying along, all in the same direction, just as if this had been a London suburb and they were scooting for the Tube, and the schoolkids were straggling up towards the market-place in twos and threes. I had the same feeling that I'd had the day before when I saw the jungle of red houses that had swallowed Chamford Hill. Bloody interlopers! Twenty thousand gate-crashers who didn't even know my name. And here was all this new life swarming to and fro, and here was I, a poor old fatty with false teeth, watching them from a window and mumbling stuff that nobody wanted to listen to about things that happened thirty and forty years ago. Christ! I thought, I was wrong to think that I was seeing ghosts. I'm the ghost myself. I'm dead and they're alive.

But after breakfast—haddock, grilled kidneys, toast and marmalade, and a pot of coffee—I felt better. The frozen dame wasn't breakfasting in the dining-room, there was a nice summery feeling in the air, and I couldn't get rid of the feeling that in that blue

flannel suit of mine I looked just a little bit distingue.By God!I thought,if I'm a ghost,I'll BE a ghost!I'll walk.I'll haunt the old places.And maybe I can work a bit of black magic on some of these bastards who've stolen my home town from me.

I started out,but I'd got no farther than the market-place when I was pulled up by something I hadn't expected to see.A procession of about fifty school-kids was marching down the street in column of fours—quite military,they looked—with a grim-looking woman marching alongside of them like a sergeant-major.The leading four were carrying a banner with a red,white,and blue border and BRITONS PREPARE on it in huge letters.The barber on the corner had come out on to his doorstep to have a look at them.I spoke to him.He was a chap with shiny black hair and a dull kind of face.

'What are those kids doing?'

'It's this here air-raid practice,'he said vaguely.'This here A.R.P.Kind of practising,like.That's Miss Todgers,that is.'

I might have guessed it was Miss Todgers.You could see it in her eye.You know the kind of tough old devil with grey hair and a kippered face that's always put in charge of Girl Guide detachments,Y.W.C.A.hostels,and whatnot.She had on a coat and skirt that somehow looked like a uniform and gave you a strong impression that she was wearing a Sam Browne belt,though actually she wasn't.I knew her type.Been in the W.A.A.C.s in the war,and never had a day's fun since.This A.R.P.was jam to her.As the kids swung past I heard her letting out at them with the real sergeant-major yell,'Monica!Lift your feet up!'and I saw that the rear four had another banner with a red,white,and blue border,and in the middle.

WE ARE READY.ARE YOU?

'What do they want to march them up and down for?'I said to the barber.

'I dunno.I s'pose it's kind of propaganda,like.'

I knew,of course.Get the kids war-minded.Give us all the feeling that there's no way out of it,the bombers are coming as sure as Christmas,so down to the cellar you go and don't argue.Two of the great black planes from Walton were zooming over the eastern end of the town.Christ!I thought,when it starts it won't surprise us any more than a shower of rain.Already we're listening for the first bomb.The barber went on to tell me that thanks to Miss Todgers's efforts the school-kids had been served with their gas-masks already.

Well,I started to explore the town.Two days I spent just wandering round the old landmarks,such of them as I could identify.And all that time I never ran across a soul that knew me.I was a ghost,and if I wasn't actually invisible,I felt like it.

It was queer,queerer than I can tell you.Did you ever read a story of H.G.Wells's about a chap who was in two places at once—that's to say,he was really in his own home,but he had a kind of hallucination that he was at the bottom of the sea?He'd be walking round his room,but instead of the tables and chairs he'd see the wavy waterweed and the great crabs and cuttlefish reaching out to get him.Well,it was just like that.For hours on end I'd be walking through a world that wasn't there.I'd count my paces as I went down the pavement and think,'Yes,here's where so-and-so's field begins.The hedge runs across the street and slap through that house.That petrol pump is really an elm tree.And here's the edge of the allotments.And this street(it was a dismal little row of semi-detached houses called Cumberledge Road,I remember)is the lane

where we used to go with Katie Simmons, and the nut-bushes grew on both sides. No doubt I got the distances wrong, but the general directions were right. I don't believe anyone who hadn't happened to be born here would have believed that these streets were fields as little as twenty years ago. It was as though the countryside had been buried by a kind of volcanic eruption from the outer suburbs. Nearly the whole of what used to be old Brewer's land had been swallowed up in the Council housing estate. The Mill Farm had vanished, the cow-pond where I caught my first fish had been drained and filled up and built over, so that I couldn't even say exactly where it used to stand. It was all houses, houses, little red cubes of houses all alike, with privet hedges and asphalt paths leading up to the front door. Beyond the Council Estate the town thinned out a bit, but the jerry-builders were doing their best. And there were little knots of houses dumped here and there, wherever anybody had been able to buy a plot of land, and the makeshift roads leading up to the houses, and empty lots with builders' boards, and bits of ruined fields covered with thistles and tin cans.

In the centre of the old town, on the other hand, things hadn't changed much, so far as buildings went. A lot of the shops were still doing the same line of trade, although the names were different. Lilywhite's was still a draper's, but it didn't look too prosperous. What used to be Gravitt's, the butcher's, was now a shop that sold radio parts. Mother Wheeler's little window had been bricked over. Grimmitt's was still a grocer's, but it had been taken over by the International. It gives you an idea of the power of these big combines that they could even swallow up a cute old skinflint like Grimmitt. But from what I know of him—not to mention that slap-up tombstone in the churchyard—I bet he got out while the going was good and had ten to fifteen thousand quid to take to heaven with him. The only shop that was still in the same hands was

Sarazins',the people who'd ruined Father.They'd swollen to enormous dimensions,and they had another huge branch in the new part of the town.But they'd turned into a kind of general store and sold furniture,drugs,hardware,and ironmongery as well as the old garden stuff.

For the best part of two days I was wandering round,not actually groaning and rattling a chain,but sometimes feeling that I'd like to.Also I was drinking more than was good for me.Almost as soon as I got to Lower Binfield I'd started on the booze,and after that the pubs never seemed to open quite early enough.My tongue was always hanging out of my mouth for the last half-hour before opening time.

Mind you,I wasn't in the same mood all the time.Sometimes it seemed to me that it didn't matter a damn if Lower Binfield had been obliterated.After all,what had I come here for,except to get away from the family?There was no reason why I shouldn't do all the things I wanted to do,even go fishing if I felt like it.On the Saturday afternoon I even went to the fishing-tackle shop in the High Street and bought a split-cane rod(I'd always pined for a split-cane rod as a boy—it's a little bit dearer than a green-heart)and hooks and gut and so forth.The atmosphere of the shop cheered me up.Whatever else changes,fishing-tackle doesn't—because,of course,fish don't change either.And the shopman didn't see anything funny in a fat middle-aged man buying a fishing-rod.On the contrary,we had a little talk about the fishing in the Thames and the big chub somebody had landed the year before last on a paste made of brown bread,honey,and minced boiled rabbit.I even—though I didn't tell him what I wanted them for,and hardly even admitted it to myself—bought the strongest salmon trace he'd got,and some No.5 roach-hooks,with an eye to those big carp at Binfield House,in case they still existed.

Most of Sunday morning I was kind of debating it in my mind—should I go fishing, or shouldn't I? One moment I'd think, why the hell not, and the next moment it would seem to me that it was just one of those things that you dream about and don't ever do. But in the afternoon I got the car out and drove down to Burford Weir. I thought I'd just have a look at the river, and tomorrow, if the weather was right, maybe I'd take my new fishing-rod and put on the old coat and grey flannel bags I had in my suitcase, and have a good day's fishing. Three or four days, if I felt like it.

I drove over Chamford Hill. Down at the bottom the road turns off and runs parallel to the towpath. I got out of the car and walked. Ah! A knot of little red and white bungalows had sprung up beside the road. Might have expected it, of course. And there seemed to be a lot of cars standing about. As I got nearer the river I came into the sound—yes, plonk-tiddle-tiddle-plonk!—yes, the sound of gramophones.

I rounded the bend and came in sight of the towpath. Christ! Another jolt. The place was black with people. And where the water-meadows used to be—tea-houses, penny-in-the-slot machines, sweet kiosks, and chaps selling Walls' Ice-Cream. Might as well have been at Margate. I remember the old towpath. You could walk along it for miles, and except for the chaps at the lock gates, and now and again a bargeman mooching along behind his horse, you'd meet never a soul. When we went fishing we always had the place to ourselves. Often I've sat there a whole afternoon, and a heron might be standing in the shallow water fifty yards up the bank, and for three or four hours on end there wouldn't be anyone passing to scare him away. But where had I got the idea that grown-up men don't go fishing? Up and down the bank, as far as I could see in both directions, there was a continuous chain of men fishing, one every five yards. I wondered how the hell they could all have got there

until it struck me that they must be some fishing-club or other. And the river was crammed with boats—rowing-boats, canoes, punts, motor-launches, full of young fools with next to nothing on, all of them screaming and shouting and most of them with a gramophone aboard as well. The floats of the poor devils who were trying to fish rocked up and down on the wash of the motor-boats.

I walked a little way. Dirty, choppy water, in spite of the fine day. Nobody was catching anything, not even minnows. I wondered whether they expected to. A crowd like that would be enough to scare every fish in creation. But actually, as I watched the floats rocking up and down among the ice-cream tubs and the paper bags, I doubted whether there were any fish to catch. Are there still fish in the Thames? I suppose there must be. And yet I'll swear the Thames water isn't the same as it used to be. Its colour is quite different. Of course you think that's merely my imagination, but I can tell you it isn't so. I know the water has changed. I remember the Thames water as it used to be, a kind of luminous green that you could see deep into, and the shoals of dace cruising round the reeds. You couldn't see three inches into the water now. It's all brown and dirty, with a film of oil in it from the motor-boats, not to mention the fag-ends and the paper bags.

After a bit I turned back. Couldn't stick the noise of the gramophones any longer. Of course it's Sunday, I thought. Mightn't be so bad on a week-day. But after all, I knew I'd never come back. God rot them, let 'em keep their bloody river. Wherever I go fishing it won't be in the Thames.

The crowds swarmed past me. Crowds of bloody aliens, and nearly all of them young. Boys and girls larking along in couples. A troop of girls came past, wearing bell-bottomed trousers and white

caps like the ones they wear in the American Navy, with slogans printed on them. One of them, seventeen she might have been, had PLEASE KISS ME. I wouldn't have minded. On an impulse I suddenly turned aside and weighed myself on one of the penny-in-the-slot machines. There was a clicking noise somewhere inside it—you know those machines that tell your fortune as well as your weight—and a typewritten card came sliding out.

You are the possessor of exceptional gifts, [I read] but owing to excessive modesty you have never received your reward. Those about you underrate your abilities. You are too fond of standing aside and allowing others to take the credit for what you have done yourself. You are sensitive, affectionate, and always loyal to your friends. You are deeply attractive to the opposite sex. Your worst fault is generosity. Persevere, for you will rise high!

Weight: 14 stone 11 pounds.

I'd put on four pounds in the last three days, I noticed. Must have been the booze.

4

I drove back to the George, dumped the car in the garage, and had a late cup of tea. As it was Sunday the bar wouldn't open for another hour or two. In the cool of the evening I went out and strolled up in the direction of the church.

I was just crossing the market-place when I noticed a woman walking a little way ahead of me. As soon as I set eyes on her I had a most peculiar feeling that I'd seen her somewhere before. You know that feeling. I couldn't see her face, of course, and so far as her back view went there was nothing I could identify and yet I could have sworn I knew her.

She went up the High Street and turned down one of the side-streets to the right, the one where Uncle Ezekiel used to have his shop. I followed. I don't quite know why—partly curiosity, perhaps, and partly as a kind of precaution. My first thought had been that here at last was one of the people I'd known in the old days in Lower Binfield, but almost at the same moment it struck me that it was just as likely that she was someone from West Bletchley. In that case I'd have to watch my step, because if she found out I was here she'd probably split to Hilda. So I followed cautiously, keeping at a safe distance and examining her back view as well as I could. There was nothing striking about it. She was a tallish, fattish woman, might have been forty or fifty, in a rather shabby black dress. She'd no hat on, as though she'd just slipped out of her house for a moment, and the way she walked gave you the impression that her shoes were down at heel. All in all, she looked a bit of a slut. And yet there was nothing to identify, only that vague something which I knew I'd seen before. It was something in her movements, perhaps. Presently she got to a little sweet and paper shop, the kind of little shop that always keeps open on a Sunday. The woman who kept it was standing in the doorway, doing something to a stand of postcards. My woman stopped to pass the time of day.

I stopped too, as soon as I could find a shop window which I could pretend to be looking into. It was a plumber's and decorator's, full of samples of wallpaper and bathroom fittings and things. By this time I wasn't fifteen yards away from the other two. I could hear their voices cooing away in one of those meaningless conversations that women have when they're just passing the time of day. 'Yes, that's jest about it. That's jest where it is. I said to him myself, I said, "Well, what else do you expect?"' I said. It don't seem right, do it? But what's the use, you might as well talk to a stone. It's a shame!' and so on and so forth. I was getting warmer. Obviously my

woman was a small shopkeeper's wife,like the other.I was just wondering whether she mightn't be one of the people I'd known in Lower Binfield after all,when she turned almost towards me and I saw three-quarters of her face.And Jesus Christ!It was Elsie!

Yes,it was Elsie.No chance of mistake.Elsie!That fat hag!

It gave me such a shock—not,mind you,seeing Elsie,but seeing what she'd grown to be like—that for a moment things swam in front of my eyes.The brass taps and ballstops and porcelain sinks and things seemed to fade away into the distance,so that I both saw them and didn't see them.Also for a moment I was in a deadly funk that she might recognise me.But she'd looked bang in my face and hadn't made any sign.A moment more,and she turned and went on.Again I followed.It was dangerous,she might spot I was following her,and that might start her wondering who I was,but I just had to have another look at her.The fact was that she exercised a kind of horrible fascination on me.In a manner of speaking I'd been watching her before,but I watched her with quite different eyes now.

It was horrible,and yet I got a kind of scientific kick out of studying her back view.It's frightening,the things that twenty-four years can do to a woman.Only twenty-four years,and the girl I'd known,with her milky-white skin and red mouth and kind of dull-gold hair,had turned into this great round-shouldered hag,shambling along on twisted heels.It made me feel downright glad I'm a man.No man ever goes to pieces quite so completely as that.I'm fat,I grant you.I'm the wrong shape,if you like.But at least I'm A shape.Elsie wasn't even particularly fat,she was merely shapeless.Ghastly things had happened to her hips.As for her waist,it had vanished.She was just a kind of soft lumpy cylinder,like a bag of meal.

I followed her a long way, out of the old town and through a lot of mean little streets I didn't know. Finally she turned in at the doorway of another shop. By the way she went in, it was obviously her own. I stopped for a moment outside the window. 'G. Cookson, Confectioner and Tobacconist.' So Elsie was Mrs. Cookson. It was a mangy little shop, much like the other one where she'd stopped before, but smaller and a lot more flyblown. Didn't seem to sell anything except tobacco and the cheapest kinds of sweets. I wondered what I could buy that would take a minute or two. Then I saw a rack of cheap pipes in the window, and I went in. I had to brace my nerve up a little before I did it, because there'd need to be some hard lying if by any chance she recognised me.

She'd disappeared into the room behind the shop, but she came back as I tapped on the counter. So we were face to face. Ah! no sign. Didn't recognise me. Just looked at me the way they do. You know the way small shopkeepers look at their customers—utter lack of interest.

It was the first time I'd seen her full face, and though I half expected what I saw, it gave me almost as big a shock as that first moment when I'd recognised her. I suppose when you look at the face of someone young, even of a child, you ought to be able to foresee what it'll look like when it's old. It's all a question of the shape of the bones. But if it had ever occurred to me, when I was twenty and she was twenty-two, to wonder what Elsie would look like at forty-seven, it wouldn't have crossed my mind that she could ever look like THAT. The whole face had kind of sagged, as if it had somehow been drawn downwards. Do you know that type of middle-aged woman that has a face just like a bulldog? Great underhung jaw, mouth turned down at the corners, eyes sunken, with pouches underneath. Exactly like a bulldog. And yet it was the same

face,I'd have known it in a million.Her hair wasn't completely grey,it was a kind of dirty colour,and there was much less of it than there used to be.She didn't know me from Adam.I was just a customer,a stranger,an uninteresting fat man.It's queer what an inch or two of fat can do.I wondered whether I'd changed even more than she had,or whether it was merely that she wasn't expecting to see me,or whether—what was the likeliest of all—she's simply forgotten my existence.

'Devening,'she said,in that listless way they have.

'I want a pipe,'I said flatly.'A briar pipe.'

'A pipe.Now jest lemme see.I know we gossome pipes somewhere.Now where did I—ah!'Ere we are.'

She took a cardboard box full of pipes from somewhere under the counter.How bad her accent had got!Or maybe I was just imagining that,because my own standards had changed?But no,she used to be so'superior',all the girls at Lilywhite's were so'superior',and she'd been a member of the vicar's Reading Circle.I swear she never used to drop her aitches.It's queer how these women go to pieces once they're married.I fiddled among the pipes for a moment and pretended to look them over.Finally I said I'd like one with an amber mouthpiece.

'Amber?I don't know as we got any—'she turned towards the back of the shop and called:'Ge-orge!'

So the other bloke's name was George too.A noise that sounded something like'Ur!'came from the back of the shop.

'Ge-orge!Where ju put that other box of pipes?'

George came in.He was a small stoutish chap,in

shirtsleeves, with a bald head and a big gingery-coloured soupstrainer moustache. His jaw was working in a ruminative kind of way. Obviously he'd been interrupted in the middle of his tea. The two of them started poking round in search of the other box of pipes. It was about five minutes before they ran it to earth behind some bottles of sweets. It's wonderful, the amount of litter they manage to accumulate in these frowsy little shops where the whole stock is worth about fifty quid.

I watched old Elsie poking about among the litter and mumbling to herself. Do you know the kind of shuffling, round-shouldered movements of an old woman who's lost something? No use trying to describe to you what I felt. A kind of cold, deadly desolate feeling. You can't conceive it unless you've had it. All I can say is, if there was a girl you used to care about twenty-five years ago, go and have a look at her now. Then perhaps you'll know what I felt.

But as a matter of fact, the thought that was chiefly in my mind was how differently things turn out from what you expect. The times I'd had with Elsie! The July nights under the chestnut trees! Wouldn't you think it would leave some kind of after-effect behind? Who'd have thought the time would ever come when there would be just no feeling whatever between us? Here was I and here was she, our bodies might be a yard apart, and we were just as much strangers as though we'd never met. As for her, she didn't even recognise me. If I told her who I was, very likely she wouldn't remember. And if she did remember, what would she feel? Just nothing. Probably wouldn't even be angry because I'd done the dirty on her. It was as if the whole thing had never happened.

And on the other hand, who'd ever have foreseen that Elsie would end up like this? She'd seemed the kind of girl who's bound to

go to the devil.I know there'd been at least one other man before I had met her,and it's safe to bet there were others between me and the second George.It wouldn't surprise me to learn that she'd had a dozen altogether.I treated her badly,there's no question about that,and many a time it had given me a bad half-hour.She'll end up on the streets,I used to think,or stick her head in the gas oven.And sometimes I felt I'd been a bit of a bastard,but other times I reflected(what was true enough)that if it hadn't been me it would have been somebody else.But you see the way things happen,the kind of dull pointless way.How many women really end up on the streets?A damn sight more end up at the mangle.She hadn't gone to the bad,or to the good either.Just ended up like everybody else,a fat old woman muddling about a frowsy little shop,with a gingery-moustached George to call her own.Probably got a string of kids as well.Mrs.George Cookson.Lived respected and died lamented—and might die this side of the bankruptcy-court,if she was lucky.

They'd found the box of pipes.Of course there weren't any with amber mouthpieces among them.

'I don't know as we got any amber ones just at present,sir.Not amber.We gossome nice vulcanite ones.'

'I wanted an amber one,'I said.

'We gossome nice pipes'ere.'She held one out.'That's a nice pipe,now.'Alf a crown,that one is.'

I took it.Our fingers touched.No kick,no reaction.The body doesn't remember.And I suppose you think I bought the pipe,just for old sake's sake,to put half a crown in Elsie's pocket.But not a bit of it.I didn't want the thing.I don't smoke a pipe.I'd merely been making a pretext to come into the shop.I turned it over in my fingers and then put it down on the counter.

'Doesn't matter,I'll leave it,'I said.'Give me a small Players'.'

Had to buy something,after all that fuss.George the second,or maybe the third or fourth,routed out a packet of Players',still munching away beneath his moustache.I could see he was sulky because I'd dragged him away from his tea for nothing.But it seemed too damn silly to waste half a crown.I cleared out and that was the last I ever saw of Elsie.

I went back to the George and had dinner.Afterwards I went out with some vague idea of going to the pictures,if they were open,but instead I landed up in one of the big noisy pubs in the new part of the town.There I ran into a couple of chaps from Staffordshire who were travelling in hardware,and we got talking about the state of trade,and playing darts and drinking Guinness.By closing time they were both so boozed that I had to take them home in a taxi,and I was a bit under the weather myself,and the next morning I woke up with a worse head than ever.

5

But I had to see the pool at Binfield House.

I felt really bad that morning.The fact was that ever since I struck Lower Binfield I'd been drinking almost continuously from every opening time to every closing time.The reason,though it hadn't occurred to me till this minute,was that really there'd been nothing else to do.That was all my trip had amounted to so far—three days on the booze.

The same as the other morning,I crawled over to the window and watched the bowler hats and school caps hustling to and fro.My enemies,I thought.The conquering army that's sacked the town and covered the ruins with fag-ends and paper bags.I wondered why I

cared. You think, I dare say, that if it had given me a jolt to find Lower Binfield swollen into a kind of Dagenham, it was merely because I don't like to see the earth getting fuller and country turning into town. But it isn't that at all. I don't mind towns growing, so long as they do grow and don't merely spread like gravy over a tablecloth. I know that people have got to have somewhere to live, and that if a factory isn't in one place it'll be in another. As for the picturesqueness, the sham countrified stuff, the oak panels and pewter dishes and copper warming-pans and what-not, it merely gives me the sick. Whatever we were in the old days, we weren't picturesque. Mother would never have seen any sense in the antiques that Wendy had filled our house with. She didn't like gateleg tables—she said they'd caught your legs'. As for pewter, she wouldn't have it in the house. 'Nasty greasy stuff', she called it. And yet, say what you like, there was something that we had in those days and haven't got now, something that you probably can't have in a streamlined milk-bar with the radio playing. I'd come back to look for it, and I hadn't found it. And yet somehow I half believe in it even now, when I hadn't yet got my teeth in and my belly was crying out for an aspirin and a cup of tea.

And that started me thinking again about the pool at Binfield House. After seeing what they'd done to the town, I'd had a feeling you could only describe as fear about going to see whether the pool still existed. And yet it might, there was no knowing. The town was smothered under red brick, our house was full of Wendy and her junk, the Thames was poisoned with motor-oil and paper bags. But maybe the pool was still there, with the great black fish still cruising round it. Maybe, even, it was still hidden in the woods and from that day to this no one had discovered it existed. It was quite possible. It was a very thick bit of wood, full of brambles and rotten brushwood (the beech trees gave way to oaks round about

there,which made the undergrowth thicker),the kind of place most people don't care to penetrate.Queerer things have happened.

I didn't start out till late afternoon.It must have been about half-past four when I took the car out and drove on to the Upper Binfield road.Half-way up the hill the houses thinned out and stopped and the beech trees began.The road forks about there and I took the right-hand fork,meaning to make a detour round and come back to Binfield House on the road.But presently I stopped to have a look at the copse I was driving through.The beech trees seemed just the same.Lord,how they were the same!I backed the car on to a bit of grass beside the road,under a fall of chalk,and got out and walked.Just the same.The same stillness,the same great beds of rustling leaves that seem to go on from year to year without rotting.Not a creature stirring except the small birds in the tree-tops which you couldn't see.It wasn't easy to believe that that great noisy mess of a town was barely three miles away.I began to make my way through the little copse,in the direction of Binfield House.I could vaguely remember how the paths went.And Lord!Yes!The same chalk hollow where the Black Hand went and had catapult shots,and Sid Lovegrove told us how babies were born,the day I caught my first fish,pretty near forty years ago!

As the trees thinned out again you could see the other road and the wall of Binfield House.The old rotting wooden fence was gone,of course,and they'd put up a high brick wall with spikes on top,such as you'd expect to see round a loony-bin.I'd puzzled for some time about how to get into Binfield House until finally it had struck me that I'd only to tell them my wife was mad and I was looking for somewhere to put her.After that they'd be quite ready to show me round the grounds.In my new suit I probably looked prosperous enough to have a wife in a private asylum.It wasn't till I was actually at the gate that it occurred to me to wonder whether

the pool was still inside the grounds.

The old grounds of Binfield House had covered fifty acres, I suppose, and the grounds of the loony-bin weren't likely to be more than five or ten. They wouldn't want a great pool of water for the loonies to drown themselves in. The lodge, where old Hodges used to live, was the same as ever, but the yellow brick wall and the huge iron gates were new. From the glimpse I got through the gates I wouldn't have known the place. Gravel walks, flower-beds, lawns, and a few aimless-looking types wandering about—loonies, I suppose. I strolled up the road to the right. The pool—the big pool, the one where I used to fish—was a couple of hundred yards behind the house. It might have been a hundred yards before I got to the corner of the wall. So the pool was outside the grounds. The trees seemed to have got much thinner. I could hear children's voices. And Gosh! there was the pool.

I stood for a moment, wondering what had happened to it. Then I saw what it was—all the trees were gone from round its edge. It looked all bare and different, in fact it looked extraordinarily like the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens. Kids were playing all round the edge, sailing boats and paddling, and a few rather older kids were rushing about in those little canoes which you work by turning a handle. Over to the left, where the old rotting boat-house used to stand among the reeds, there was a sort of pavilion and a sweet kiosk, and a huge white notice saying UPPER BINFIELD MODEL YACHT CLUB.

I looked over to the right. It was all houses, houses, houses. One might as well have been in the outer suburbs. All the woods that used to grow beyond the pool, and grew so thick that they were like a kind of tropical jungle, had been shaved flat. Only a few clumps of trees still standing round the houses. There were arty-looking

houses,another of those sham-Tudor colonies like the one I'd seen the first day at the top of Chamford Hill,only more so.What a fool I'd been to imagine that these woods were still the same!I saw how it was.There was just the one tiny bit of copse,half a dozen acres perhaps,that hadn't been cut down,and it was pure chance that I'd walked through it on my way here.Upper Binfield,which had been merely a name in the old days,had grown into a decent-sized town.In fact it was merely an outlying chunk of Lower Binfield.

I wandered up to the edge of the pool.The kids were splashing about and making the devil of a noise.There seemed to be swarms of them.The water looked kind of dead.No fish in it now.There was a chap standing watching the kids.He was an oldish chap with a bald head and a few tufts of white hair,and pince-nez and very sunburnt face.There was something vaguely queer about his appearance.He was wearing shorts and sandals and one of those celanese shirts open at the neck,I noticed,but what really struck me was the look in his eye.He had very blue eyes that kind of twinkled at you from behind his spectacles.I could see that he was one of those old men who've never grown up.They're always either health-food cranks or else they have something to do with the Boy Scouts—in either case they're great ones for Nature and the open air.He was looking at me as if he'd like to speak.

'Upper Binfield's grown a great deal,'I said.

He twinkled at me.

'Grown!My dear sir,we never allow Upper Binfield to grow.We pride ourselves on being rather exceptional people up here,you know.Just a little colony of us all by ourselves.No interlopers—te-hee!'

'I meant compared with before the war,'I said.'I used to live

here as a boy.'

'Oh-ah.No doubt.That was before my time,of course.But the Upper Binfield Estate is something rather special in the way of building estates,you know.Quite a little world of its own.All designed by young Edward Watkin,the architect.You've heard of him,of course.We live in the midst of Nature up here.No connexion with the town down there'—he waved a hand in the direction of Lower Binfield—'the dark satanic mills—te-hee!'

He had a benevolent old chuckle,and a way of wrinkling his face up,like a rabbit.Immediately,as though I'd asked him,he began telling me all about the Upper Binfield Estate and young Edward Watkin,the architect,who had such a feeling for the Tudor,and was such a wonderful fellow at finding genuine Elizabethan beams in old farmhouses and buying them at ridiculous prices.And such an interesting young fellow,quite the life and soul of the nudist parties.He repeated a number of times that they were very exceptional people in Upper Binfield,quite different from Lower Binfield,they were determined to enrich the countryside instead of defiling it(I'm using his own phrase),and there weren't any public houses on the estate.

'They talk of their Garden Cities.But we call Upper Binfield the Woodland City—te-hee!Nature!'He waved a hand at what was left of the trees.'The primeval forest brooding round us.Our young people grow up amid surroundings of natural beauty.We are nearly all of us enlightened people,of course.Would you credit that three-quarters of us up here are vegetarians?The local butchers don't like us at all—te-hee!And some quite eminent people live here.Miss Helena Thurloe,the novelist—you've heard of her,of course.And Professor Woad,the psychic research worker.Such a poetic character!He goes wandering out into the woods and the family

can't find him at mealtimes. He says he's walking among the fairies. Do you believe in fairies? I admit—te-hee!—I am just a wee bit sceptical. But his photographs are most convincing.'

I began to wonder whether he was someone who'd escaped from Binfield House. But no, he was sane enough, after a fashion. I knew the type. Vegetarianism, simple life, poetry, nature-worship, roll in the dew before breakfast. I'd met a few of them years ago in Ealing. He began to show me round the estate. There was nothing left of the woods. It was all houses, houses—and what houses! Do you know these faked-up Tudor houses with the curly roofs and the buttresses that don't buttress anything, and the rock-gardens with concrete bird-baths and those red plaster elves you can buy at the florists'? You could see in your mind's eye the awful gang of food-cranks and spook-hunters and simple-lifers with 1,000 pounds a year that lived there. Even the pavements were crazy. I didn't let him take me far. Some of the houses made me wish I'd got a hand-grenade in my pocket. I tried to damp him down by asking whether people didn't object to living so near the lunatic asylum, but it didn't have much effect. Finally I stopped and said:

'There used to be another pool, besides the big one. It can't be far from here.'

'Another pool? Oh, surely not. I don't think there was ever another pool.'

'They may have drained it off,' I said. 'It was a pretty deep pool. It would leave a big pit behind.'

For the first time he looked a bit uneasy. He rubbed his nose.

'Oh-ah. Of course, you must understand our life up here is in some ways primitive. The simple life, you know. We prefer it so. But

being so far from the town has its inconveniences, of course. Some of our sanitary arrangements are not altogether satisfactory. The dust-cart only calls once a month, I believe.'

'You mean they've turned the pool into a rubbish-dump?'

'Well, there IS something in the nature of a—'he shied at the word rubbish-dump. 'We have to dispose of tins and so forth, of course. Over there, behind that clump of trees.'

We went across there. They'd left a few trees to hid it. But yes, there it was. It was my pool, all right. They'd drained the water off. It made a great round hole, like an enormous well, twenty or thirty feet deep. Already it was half full of tin cans.

I stood looking at the tin cans.

'It's a pity they drained it,' I said. 'There used to be some big fish in that pool.'

'Fish? Oh, I never heard anything about that. Of course we could hardly have a pool of water here among the houses. The mosquitoes, you know. But it was before my time.'

'I suppose these houses have been built a good long time?' I said.

'Oh—ten or fifteen years, I think.'

'I used to know this place before the war,' I said. 'It was all woods then. There weren't any houses except Binfield House. But that little bit of copse over there hasn't changed. I walked through it on my way here.'

'Ah, that! That is sacrosanct. We have decided never to build in

it. It is sacred to the young people. Nature, you know.' He twinkled at me, a kind of roguish look, as if he was letting me into a little secret: 'We call it the Pixy Glen.'

The Pixy Glen. I got rid of him, went back to the car and drove down to Lower Binfield. The Pixy Glen. And they'd filled my pool up with tin cans. God rot them and bust them! Say what you like—call it silly, childish, anything—but doesn't it make you puke sometimes to see what they're doing to England, with their bird-baths and their plaster gnomes, and their pixies and tin cans, where the beech woods used to be?

Sentimental, you say? Anti-social? Oughtn't to prefer trees to men? I say it depends what trees and what men. Not that there's anything one can do about it, except to wish them the pox in their guts.

One thing, I thought as I drove down the hill, I'm finished with this notion of getting back into the past. What's the good of trying to revisit the scenes of your boyhood? They don't exist. Coming up for air! But there isn't any air. The dustbin that we're in reaches up to the stratosphere. All the same, I didn't particularly care. After all, I thought, I've still got three days left. I'd have a bit of peace and quiet, and stop bothering about what they'd done to Lower Binfield. As for my idea of going fishing—that was off, of course. Fishing, indeed! At my age! Really, Hilda was right.

I dumped the car in the garage of the George and walked into the lounge. It was six o'clock. Somebody had switched on the wireless and the news-broadcast was beginning. I came through the door just in time to hear the last few words of an S.O.S. And it gave me a bit of a jolt, I admit. For the words I heard were:

'—where his wife, Hilda Bowling, is seriously ill.'

The next instant the plummy voice went on: 'Here is another S.O.S. Will Percival Chute, who was last heard of—', but I didn't wait to hear any more. I just walked straight on. What made me feel rather proud, when I thought it over afterwards, was that when I heard those words come out of the loudspeaker I never turned an eyelash. Not even a pause in my step to let anyone know that I was George Bowling, whose wife Hilda Bowling was seriously ill. The landlord's wife was in the lounge, and she knew my name was Bowling, at any rate she'd seen it in the register. Otherwise there was nobody there except a couple of chaps who were staying at the George and who didn't know me from Adam. But I kept my head. Not a sign to anyone. I merely walked on into the private bar, which had just opened, and ordered my pint as usual.

I had to think it over. By the time I'd drunk about half the pint I began to get the bearings of the situation. In the first place, Hilda WASN'T ill, seriously or otherwise. I knew that. She'd been perfectly well when I came away, and it wasn't the time of the year for flu or anything of that kind. She was shamming. Why?

Obviously it was just another of her dodges. I saw how it was. She'd got wind somehow—trust Hilda!—that I wasn't really at Birmingham, and this was just her way of getting me home. Couldn't bear to think of me any longer with that other woman. Because of course she'd take it for granted that I was with a woman. Can't imagine any other motive. And naturally she assumed that I'd come rushing home as soon as I heard she was ill.

But that's just where you've got it wrong, I thought to myself as I finished off the pint. I'm too cute to be caught that way. I remembered the dodges she'd pulled before, and the extraordinary trouble she'll take to catch me out. I've even known her, when I'd been on some journey she was suspicious about, check it all up with

a Bradshaw and a road-map, just to see whether I was telling the truth about my movements. And then there was that time when she followed me all the way to Colchester and suddenly burst in on me at the Temperance Hotel. And that time, unfortunately, she happened to be right—at least, she wasn't, but there were circumstances which made it look as if she was. I hadn't the slightest belief that she was ill. In fact, I knew she wasn't, although I couldn't say exactly how.

I had another pint and things looked better. Of course there was a row coming when I got home, but there'd have been a row anyway. I've got three good days ahead of me, I thought. Curiously enough, now that the things I'd come to look for had turned out not to exist, the idea of having a bit of holiday appealed to me all the more. Being away from home—that was the great thing. Peace perfect peace with loved ones far away, as the hymn puts it. And suddenly I decided that I WOULD have a woman if I felt like it. It would serve Hilda right for being so dirty-minded, and besides, where's the sense of being suspected if it isn't true?

But as the second pint worked inside me, the thing began to amuse me. I hadn't fallen for it, but it was damned ingenious all the same. I wondered how she'd managed about the S.O.S. I've no idea what the procedure is. Do you have to have a doctor's certificate, or do you just send your name in? I felt pretty sure it was the Wheeler woman who'd put her up to it. It seemed to me to have the Wheeler touch.

But all the same, the cheek of it! The lengths that women will go! Sometimes you can't help kind of admiring them.

After breakfast I strolled out into the market-place. It was a lovely morning, kind of cool and still, with a pale yellow light like

white wine playing over everything. The fresh smell of the morning was mixed up with the smell of my cigar. But there was a zooming noise from behind the houses, and suddenly a fleet of great black bombers came whizzing over. I looked up at them. They seemed to be bang overhead.

The next moment I heard something. And at the same moment, if you'd happened to be there, you'd have seen an interesting instance of what I believe is called conditioned reflex. Because what I'd heard—there wasn't any question of mistake—was the whistle of a bomb. I hadn't heard such a thing for twenty years, but I didn't need to be told what it was. And without taking any kind of thought I did the right thing. I flung myself on my face.

After all I'm glad you didn't see me. I don't suppose I looked dignified. I was flattened out on the pavement like a rat when it squeezes under a door. Nobody else had been half as prompt. I'd acted so quickly that in the split second while the bomb was whistling down I even had time to be afraid that it was all a mistake and I'd made a fool of myself for nothing.

But the next moment—ah!

BOOM-BRRRRR!

A noise like the Day of Judgment, and then a noise like a ton of coal falling on to a sheet of tin. That was falling bricks. I seemed to kind of melt into the pavement. 'It's started,' I thought. 'I knew it! Old Hitler didn't wait. Just sent his bombers across without warning.'

And yet here's a peculiar thing. Even in the echo of that awful, deafening crash, which seemed to freeze me up from top to toe, I had time to think that there's something grand about the bursting of a big projectile. What does it sound like? It's hard to

say,because what you hear is mixed up with what you're frightened of.Mainly it gives you a vision of bursting metal.You seem to see great sheets of iron bursting open.But the peculiar thing is the feeling it gives you of being suddenly shoved up against reality.It's like being woken up by somebody shying a bucket of water over you.You're suddenly dragged out of your dreams by a clang of bursting metal,and it's terrible,and it's real.

There was a sound of screams and yells,and also of car brakes being suddenly jammed on.The second bomb which I was waiting for didn't fall.I raised my head a little.On every side people seemed to be rushing round and screaming.A car was skidding diagonally across the road,I could hear a woman's voice shrieking,'The Germans!The Germans!'To the right I had a vague impression of a man's round white face,rather like a wrinkled paper bag,looking down at me.He was kind of dithering:

'What is it?What's happened?What are they doing?'

'It's started,'I said.'That was a bomb.Lie down.'

But still the second bomb didn't fall.Another quarter of a minute or so,and I raised my head again.Some of the people were still rushing about,others were standing as if they'd been glued to the ground.From somewhere behind the houses a huge haze of dust had risen up,and through it a black jet of smoke was streaming upwards.And then I saw an extraordinary sight.At the other end of the market-place the High Street rises a little.And down this little hill a herd of pigs was galloping,a sort of huge flood of pig-faces.The next moment,of course,I saw what it was.It wasn't pigs at all,it was only the schoolchildren in their gas-masks.I suppose they were bolting for some cellar where they'd been told to take cover in case of air-raids.At the back of them I could even make out a taller

pig who was probably Miss Todgers. But I tell you for a moment they looked exactly like a herd of pigs.

I picked myself up and walked across the market-place. People were calming down already, and quite a little crowd had begun to flock towards the place where the bomb had dropped.

Oh, yes, you're right, of course. It wasn't a German aeroplane after all. The war hadn't broken out. It was only an accident. The planes were flying over to do a bit of bombing practice—at any rate they were carrying bombs—and somebody had put his hands on the lever by mistake. I expect he got a good ticking off for it. By the time that the postmaster had rung up London to ask whether there was a war on, and been told that there wasn't, everyone had grasped that it was an accident. But there'd been a space of time, something between a minute and five minutes, when several thousand people believed we were at war. A good job it didn't last any longer. Another quarter of an hour and we'd have been lynching our first spy.

I followed the crowd. The bomb had dropped in a little side-street off the High Street, the one where Uncle Ezekiel used to have his shop. It wasn't fifty yards from where the shop used to be. As I came round the corner I could hear voices murmuring 'Oo-oo!'—a kind of awed noise, as if they were frightened and getting a big kick out of it. Luckily I got there a few minutes before the ambulance and the fire-engine, and in spite of the fifty people or so that had already collected I saw everything.

At first sight it looked as if the sky had been raining bricks and vegetables. There were cabbage leaves everywhere. The bomb had blown a greengrocer's shop out of existence. The house to the right of it had part of its roof blown off, and the roof beams were on

fire, and all the houses round had been more or less damaged and had their windows smashed. But what everyone was looking at was the house on the left. Its wall, the one that joined the greengrocer's shop, was ripped off as neatly as if someone had done it with a knife. And what was extraordinary was that in the upstairs rooms nothing had been touched. It was just like looking into a doll's house. Chests-of-drawers, bedroom chairs, faded wallpaper, a bed not yet made, and a jerry under the bed—all exactly as it had been lived in, except that one wall was gone. But the lower rooms had caught the force of the explosion. There was a frightful smashed-up mess of bricks, plaster, chair-legs, bits of a varnished dresser, rags of tablecloth, piles of broken plates, and chunks of a scullery sink. A jar of marmalade had rolled across the floor, leaving a long streak of marmalade behind, and running side by side with it there was a ribbon of blood. But in among the broken crockery there was lying a leg. Just a leg, with the trouser still on it and a black boot with a Wood-Milne rubber heel. This was what people were oo-ing and ah-ing at.

I had a good look at it and took it in. The blood was beginning to get mixed up with the marmalade. When the fire-engine arrived I cleared off to the George to pack my bag.

This finishes me with Lower Binfield, I thought. I'm going home. But as a matter of fact I didn't shake the dust off my shoes and leave immediately. One never does. When anything like that happens, people always stand about and discuss it for hours. There wasn't much work done in the old part of Lower Binfield that day, everyone was too busy talking about the bomb, what it sounded like and what they thought when they heard it. The barmaid at the George said it fair gave her the shudders. She said she'd never sleep sound in her bed again, and what did you expect, it just showed that with these here bombs you never knew. A woman had bitten off part

of her tongue owing to the jump the explosion gave her. It turned out that whereas at our end of the town everyone had imagined it was a German air-raid, everyone at the other end had taken it for granted that it was an explosion at the stocking factory. Afterwards (I got this out of the newspaper) the Air Ministry sent a chap to inspect the damage, and issued a report saying that the effects of the bomb were 'disappointing'. As a matter of fact it only killed three people, the greengrocer, Perrott his name was, and an old couple who lived next door. The woman wasn't much smashed about, and they identified the old man by his boots, but they never found a trace of Perrott. Not even a trouser-button to read the burial service over.

In the afternoon I paid my bill and hooked it. I didn't have much more than three quid left after I'd paid the bill. They know how to cut it out of you these dolled-up country hotels, and what with drinks and other odds and ends I'd been shying money about pretty freely. I left my new rod and the rest of the fishing tackle in my bedroom. Let 'em keep it. No use to me. It was merely a quid that I'd chucked down the drain to teach myself a lesson. And I'd learnt the lesson all right. Fat men of forty-five can't go fishing. That kind of thing doesn't happen any longer, it's just a dream, there'll be no more fishing this side of the grave.

It's funny how things sink into you by degrees. What had I really felt when the bomb exploded? At the actual moment, of course, it scared the wits out of me, and when I saw the smashed-up house and the old man's leg I'd had the kind of mild kick that you get from seeing a street-accident. Disgusting, of course. Quite enough to make me fed-up with this so-called holiday. But it hadn't really made much impression.

But as I got clear of the outskirts of Lower Binfield and turned the car eastward, it all came back to me. You know how it is when

you're in a car alone. There's something either in the hedges flying past you, or in the throb of the engine, that gets your thoughts running in a certain rhythm. You have the same feeling sometimes when you're in the train. It's a feeling of being able to see things in better perspective than usual. All kinds of things that I'd been doubtful about I felt certain about now. To begin with, I'd come to Lower Binfield with a question in my mind. What's ahead of us? Is the game really up? Can we get back to the life we used to live, or is it gone for ever? Well, I'd had my answer. The old life's finished, and to go back to Lower Binfield, you can't put Jonah back into the whale. I KNEW, though I don't expect you to follow my train of thought. And it was a queer thing I'd done coming here. All those years Lower Binfield had been tucked away somewhere or other in my mind, a sort of quiet corner that I could step back into when I felt like it, and finally I'd stepped back into it and found that it didn't exist. I'd chucked a pineapple into my dreams, and lest there should be any mistake the Royal Air Force had followed up with five hundred pounds of T.N.T.

War is coming. 1941, they say. And there'll be plenty of broken crockery, and little houses ripped open like packing-cases, and the guts of the chartered accountant's clerk plastered over the piano that he's buying on the never-never. But what does that kind of thing matter, anyway? I'll tell you what my stay in Lower Binfield had taught me, and it was this. IT'S ALL GOING TO HAPPEN. All the things you've got at the back of your mind, the things you're terrified of, the things that you tell yourself are just a nightmare or only happen in foreign countries. The bombs, the food-queues, the rubber truncheons, the barbed wire, the coloured shirts, the slogans, the enormous faces, the machine-guns squirting out of bedroom windows. It's all going to happen. I know it—at any rate, I knew it then. There's no escape. Fight against it if you like, or look the other

way and pretend not to notice, or grab your spanner and rush out to do a bit of face-smashing along with the others. But there's no way out. It's just something that's got to happen.

I trod on the gas, and the old car whizzed up and down the little hills, and the cows and elm trees and fields of wheat rushed past till the engine was pretty nearly red-hot. I felt in much the same mood as I'd felt that day in January when I was coming down the Strand, the day I got my new false teeth. It was as though the power of prophecy had been given me. It seemed to me that I could see the whole of England, and all the people in it, and all the things that'll happen to all of them. Sometimes, of course, even then, I had a doubt or two. The world is very large, that's a thing you notice when you're driving about in a car, and in a way it's reassuring. Think of the enormous stretches of land you pass over when you cross a corner of a single English county. It's like Siberia. And the fields and beech spinneys and farmhouses and churches, and the villages with their little grocers' shops and the parish hall and the ducks walking across the green. Surely it's too big to be changed? Bound to remain more or less the same. And presently I struck into outer London and followed the Uxbridge Road as far as Southall. Miles and miles of ugly houses, with people living dull decent lives inside them. And beyond it London stretching on and on, streets, squares, back-alleys, tenements, blocks of flats, pubs, fried-fish shops, picture-houses, on and on for twenty miles, and all the eight million people with their little private lives which they don't want to have altered. The bombs aren't made that could smash it out of existence. And the chaos of it! The privateness of all those lives! John Smith cutting out the football coupons, Bill Williams swapping stories in the barber's. Mrs. Jones coming home with the supper beer. Eight million of them! Surely they'll manage somehow, bombs or no bombs, to keep on with the life that they've been used to?

Illusion!Baloney!It doesn't matter how many of them there are,they're all for it.The bad times are coming,and the streamlined men are coming too.What's coming afterwards I don't know,it hardly even interests me.I only know that if there's anything you care a curse about,better say good-bye to it now,because everything you've ever known is going down,down,into the muck,with the machine-guns rattling all the time.

7

But when I got back to the suburb my mood suddenly changed.

It suddenly struck me—and it hadn't even crossed my mind till that moment—that Hilda might really be ill after all.

That's the effect of environment,you see.In Lower Binfield I'd taken it absolutely for granted that she wasn't ill and was merely shamming in order to get me home.It had seemed natural at the time,I don't know why.But as I drove into West Bletchley and the Hesperides Estate closed round me like a kind of red-brick prison,which is what it is,the ordinary habits of thought came back.I had this kind of Monday morning feeling when everything seems bleak and sensible.I saw what bloody rot it was,this business that I'd wasted the last five days on.Sneaking off to Lower Binfield to try and recover the past,and then,in the car coming home,thinking a lot of prophetic baloney about the future.The future!What's the future got to do with chaps like you and me? Holding down our jobs—that's our future.As for Hilda,even when the bombs are dropping she'll be still thinking about the price of butter.

And suddenly I saw what a fool I'd been to think she'd do a thing like that.Of course the S.O.S.wasn't a fake!As though she'd have the imagination!It was just the plain cold truth.She wasn't

shamming at all,she was really ill.And Gosh!at this moment she might be lying somewhere in ghastly pain,or even dead,for all I knew.The thought sent a most horrible pang of fright through me,a sort of dreadful cold feeling in my guts.I whizzed down Ellesmere Road at nearly forty miles an hour,and instead of taking the car to the lock-up garage as usual I stopped outside the house and jumped out.

So I'm fond of Hilda after all,you say!I don't know exactly what you mean by fond.Are you fond of your own face?Probably not,but you can't imagine yourself without it.It's part of you.Well,that's how I felt about Hilda.When things are going well I can't stick the sight of her,but the thought that she might be dead or even in pain sent the shivers through me.

I fumbled with the key,got the door open,and the familiar smell of old mackintoshes hit me.

'Hilda!'I yelled.'Hilda!'

No answer.For a moment I was yelling'Hilda!Hilda!'into utter silence,and some cold sweat started out on my backbone.Maybe they carted her away to hospital already—maybe there was a corpse lying upstairs in the empty house.

I started to dash up the stairs,but at the same moment the two kids,in their pyjamas,came out of their rooms on either side of the landing.It was eight or nine o'clock,I suppose—at any rate the light was just beginning to fail.Lorna hung over the banisters.

'Oo,Daddy!Oo,it's Daddy!Why have you come back today? Mummy said you weren't coming till Friday.'

'Where's your mother?'I said.

'Mummy's out.She went out with Mrs.Wheeler.Why have you come home today,Daddy?'

'Then your mother hasn't been ill?'

'No.Who said she'd been ill?Daddy!Have you been in Birmingham?'

'Yes.Get back to bed,now.You'll be catching cold.'

'But where's our presents,Daddy?'

'What presents?'

'The presents you've bought us from Birmingham.'

'You'll see them in the morning,I said.'

'Oo,Daddy!Can't we see them tonight?'

'No.Dry up.Get back to bed or I'll wallop the pair of you.'

So she wasn't ill after all.She HAD been shamming.And really I hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry.I turned back to the front door,which I'd left open,and there,as large as life,was Hilda coming up the garden path.

I looked at her as she came towards me in the last of the evening light.It was queer to think that less than three minutes earlier I'd been in the devil of a stew,with actual cold sweat on my backbone,at the thought that she might be dead.Well,she wasn't dead,she was just as usual.Old Hilda with her thin shoulders and her anxious face,and the gas bill and the school-fees,and the mackintoshy smell and the office on Monday—all the bedrock facts that you invariably come back to,the eternal verities as old Porteous calls them.I could see that Hilda wasn't in too good a temper.She

darted me a little quick look,like she does sometimes when she's got something on her mind,the kind of look some little thin animal,a weasel for instance,might give you.She didn't seem surprised to see me back,however.

'Oh,so you're back already,are you?'she said.

It seemed pretty obvious that I was back,and I didn't answer.She didn't make any move to kiss me.

'There's nothing for your supper,'she went on promptly.That's Hilda all over.Always manages to say something depressing the instant you set foot inside the house.'I wasn't expecting you.You'll just have to have bread and cheese—but I don't think we've got any cheese.'

I followed her indoors,into the smell of mackintoshes.We went into the sitting-room.I shut the door and switched on the light.I meant to get my say in first,and I knew it would make things better if I took a strong line from the start.

'Now',I said,'what the bloody hell do you mean by playing that trick on me?'

She'd just laid her bag down on top of the radio,and for a moment she looked genuinely surprised.

'What trick?What do you mean?'

'Sending out that S.O.S.!'

'What S.O.S.?What are you TALKING about,George?'

'Are you trying to tell me you didn't get them to send out an S.O.S.saying you were seriously ill?'

'Of course I didn't!How could I?I wasn't ill.What would I do a thing like that for?'

I began to explain,but almost before I began I saw what had happened.It was all a mistake.I'd only heard the last few words of the S.O.S.and obviously it was some other Hilda Bowling.I suppose there'd be scores of Hilda Bowlings if you looked the name up in the directory.It just was the kind of dull stupid mistake that's always happening.Hilda hadn't even showed that little bit of imagination I'd credited her with.The sole interest in the whole affair had been the five minutes or so when I thought she was dead,and found that I cared after all.But that was over and done with.While I explained she was watching me,and I could see in her eye that there was trouble of some kind coming.And then she began questioning me in what I call her third-degree voice,which isn't,as you might expect,angry and nagging,but quiet and kind of watchful.

'So you heard this S.O.S.in the hotel at Birmingham?'

'Yes.Last night,on the National Broadcast.'

'When did you leave Birmingham,then?'

'This morning,of course.'(I'd planned out the journey in my mind,just in case there should be any need to lie my way out of it.Left at ten,lunch at Coventry,tea at Bedford—I'd got it all mapped out.)

'So you thought last night I was seriously ill,and you didn't even leave till this morning?'

'But I tell you I didn't think you were ill.Haven't I explained?I thought it was just another of your tricks.It sounded a damn sight more likely.'

'Then I'm rather surprised you left at all!'she said with so much vinegar in her voice that I knew there was something more coming.But she went on more quietly:'So you left this morning,did you?'

'Yes.I left about ten.I had lunch at Coventry—'

'Then how do you account for THIS?'she suddenly shot out at me,and in the same instant she ripped her bag open,took out a piece of paper,and held it out as if it had been a forged cheque,or something.

I felt as if someone had hit me a sock in the wind.I might have known it!She'd caught me after all.And there was the evidence,the dossier of the case.I didn't even know what it was,except that it was something that proved I'd been off with a woman.All the stuffing went out of me.A moment earlier I'd been kind of bullying her,making out to be angry because I'd been dragged back from Birmingham for nothing,and now she'd suddenly turned the tables on me.You don't have to tell me what I looked like at that moment.I know.Guilt written all over me in big letters—I know.And I wasn't even guilty!But it's a matter of habit.I'm used to being in the wrong.For a hundred quid I couldn't have kept the guilt out of my voice as I answered:

'What do you mean?What's that thing you've got there?'

'You read it and you'll see what it is.'

I took it.It was a letter from what seemed to be a firm of solicitors,and it was addressed from the same street as Rowbottom's Hotel,I noticed.

'Dear Madam,'I read,'With reference to your letter of the 18th

inst.,we think there must be some mistake.Rowbottom's Hotel was closed down two years ago and has been converted into a block of offices.No one answering the description of your husband has been here.Possibly—'

I didn't read any further.Of course I saw it all in a flash.I'd been a little bit too clever and put my foot in it.There was just one faint ray of hope—young Saunders might have forgotten to post the letter I'd addressed from Rowbottom's,in which case it was just possible I could brazen it out.But Hilda soon put the lid on that idea.

'Well,George,you see what the letter says?The day you left here I wrote to Rowbottom's Hotel—oh,just a little note,asking them whether you'd arrived there.And you see the answer I got!There isn't even any such place as Rowbottom's Hotel.And the same day,the very same post,I got your letter saying you were at the hotel.You got someone to post it for you,I suppose.THAT was your business in Birmingham!'

'But look here,Hilda!You've got this all wrong.It isn't what you think at all.You don't understand.'

'Oh,yes,I do,George.I understand PERFECTLY.'

'But look here,Hilda—'

Wasn't any use,of course.It was a fair cop.I couldn't even meet her eye.I turned and tried to make for the door.

'I'll have to take the car round to the garage,'I said.

'Oh,no George!You don't get out of it like that.You'll stay here and listen to what I've got to say,please.'

'But,damn it!I've got to switch the lights on,haven't I?It's past lighting-up time.You don't want us to get fined?'

At that she let me go,and I went out and switched the car lights on,but when I came back she was still standing there like a figure of doom,with the two letters,mine and the solicitor's on the table in front of her.I'd got a little of my nerve back,and I had another try:

'Listen,Hilda.You've got hold of the wrong end of the stick about this business.I can explain the whole thing.'

'I'm sure YOU could explain anything,George.The question is whether I'd believe you.'

'But you're just jumping to conclusions!What made you write to these hotel people,anyway?'

'It was Mrs.Wheeler's idea.And a very good idea too,as it turned out.'

'Oh,Mrs.Wheeler,was it?So you don't mind letting that blasted woman into our private affairs?'

'She didn't need any letting in.It was she who warned me what you were up to this week.Something seemed to tell her,she said.And she was right,you see.She knows all about you,George.She used to have a husband JUST like you.'

'But,Hilda—'

I looked at her.Her face had gone a kind of white under the surface,the way it does when she thinks of me with another woman.A woman.If only it had been true!

And Gosh!what I could see ahead of me!You know what it's

like. The weeks on end of ghastly nagging and sulking, and the catty remarks after you think peace has been signed, and the meals always late, and the kids wanting to know what it's all about. But what really got me down was the kind of mental squalor, the kind of mental atmosphere in which the real reason why I'd gone to Lower Binfield wouldn't even be conceivable. That was what chiefly struck me at the moment. If I spent a week explaining to Hilda WHY I'd been to Lower Binfield, she'd never understand. And who WOULD understand, here in Ellesmere Road? Gosh! did I even understand myself? The whole thing seemed to be fading out of my mind. Why had I gone to Lower Binfield? HAD I gone there? In this atmosphere it just seemed meaningless. Nothing's real in Ellesmere Road except gas-bills, school-fees, boiled cabbage, and the office on Monday.

One more try:

'But look here, Hilda! I know what you think. But you're absolutely wrong. I swear to you you're wrong.'

'Oh, no, George. If I was wrong why did you have to tell all those lies?'

No getting away from that, of course.

I took a pace or two up and down. The smell of old mackintoshes was very strong. Why had I run away like that? Why had I bothered about the future and the past, seeing that the future and the past don't matter? Whatever motives I might have had, I could hardly remember them now. The old life in Lower Binfield, the war and the after-war, Hitler, Stalin, bombs, machine-guns, food-queues, rubber truncheons—it was fading out, all fading out. Nothing remained except a vulgar low-down row in a smell of old mackintoshes.

One last try:

'Hilda! Just listen to me a minute. Look here, you don't know where I've been all this week, do you?'

'I don't want to know where you've been. I know WHAT you've been doing. That's quite enough for me.'

'But dash it—'

Quite useless, of course. She'd found me guilty and now she was going to tell me what she thought of me. That might take her a couple of hours. And after that there was further trouble looming up, because presently it would occur to her to wonder where I'd got the money for this trip, and then she'd discover that I'd been holding out on her about the seventeen quid. Really there was no reason why this row shouldn't go on till three in the morning. No use playing injured innocence any longer. All I wanted was the line of least resistance. And in my mind I ran over the three possibilities, which were:

A. To tell her what I'd really been doing and somehow make her believe me.

B. To pull the old gag about losing my memory.

C. To let her go on thinking it was a woman, and take my medicine.

But, damn it! I knew which it would have to be.

[1] 英石 (stone)，英制重量单位，相当于14磅，因此主人公体重为196磅，即90公斤左右 (1磅=0.454公斤)。

[2] 在生孪生胎时会发生额外费用，故有此险种。

[3] 品脱及夸脱均属英制度量单位，1品脱=0.568升，1夸脱=1.136升。

[4] 佐格国王 (1895-1961)，阿尔巴尼亚国王，1928-1939年在位。

[5] 此处的名字是房主为自己的房子起的名字，后3处原文为法语。

[6] 指源于希腊神话、象征丰饶的羊角。

[7] “美妙风景”原为法语Belle Vue，其中Belle (美的) 与英语中bell (钟) 字形接近，故有此写。

[8] 奥利佛·哈代 (1892-1957)，美国喜剧电影明星。

[9] 克里彭案 (1910年)，H.H.克里彭医生被控于1909年毒死妻子并分尸，后被判处绞刑；

塞顿案 (1911年)，F.H.塞顿被控毒死房客并侵占其财产，后被判处绞刑；梅布里克太太案 (1889年)，弗洛里·梅布里克被控投毒谋杀丈夫詹姆斯·梅布里克。弗洛里·梅布里克被判绞刑，后改判终身监禁，最后被关押15年后释放。

[10] 用小牛头或小牛肉等加香料能作成假甲鱼汤。

[11] 蓖麻油有泻肚的作用，因此可被用作折磨人。

[12] 一种穿戴在上装衣领外面的白色硬宽领，以前伊顿公学学生常戴此领，故有此名。

[13] 指《圣经·旧约》中的《诗篇》第135首。根据《圣经·旧约》，亚摩利王西宏和巴珊王噩是在先知摩西率犹太人出埃及后与犹太人交战而死的两个国王。佐格国王 (King Zog) 中的Zog与Og (噩) 押韵，因此使“我”产生了联想。

[14] 此处指前面的“和” (and) 中的d和后面的 (巴珊王) “噩” (Og) 连在了一起，成为dog (狗)。

[15] 亚设，《圣经·旧约》中的人物，为雅各之子，后为以色列人的一支；在古以色列王国时，但和别是巴一个在北，一个在南。

[16] 此处似指《圣经·旧约·撒母耳记下》中的几段记述。

[17] 示每是跟随摩西出埃及的利未人革顺的儿子，尼布甲尼撒 (公元前630?—公元

前562)是巴比伦国王,亚希多弗是以色列大卫王的谋士,哈示巴达达不详,疑为作者笔误。

[18] 约瑟夫·张伯伦(1836-1914),英国政治家,原为自由党统一派领袖,后任保守党殖民大臣,推行扩张政策,挑起南非战争,倡议保护关税和帝国特惠税制。

[19] 据《圣经·旧约·约拿书》记载,约拿是上帝的仆人,曾被派往尼尼微城传达信息,但约拿想躲避,上帝为了惩罚他,让一条大鱼吞下约拿,约拿不断祷告,大鱼又将约拿吐到海滨的沙滩上;根据《圣经·旧约·但以理书》中记载,此三人为巴比伦王尼布甲尼撒王委派管理以色列人事务的三个以色列人,由于他们不敬巴比伦人的神,被投进火窑中,但三人毫发无损。

[20] 1603年以后,英王室的纹章中,右为一雄狮,左为一独角兽,两兽均立起前肢,扶持中央的盾形纹章。

[21] 即英布战争,也叫“南非战争”,指英国对南非布尔人的战争。布尔人是南非荷兰移民后裔,19世纪在南非建立奴役黑人的德兰士瓦共和国和奥兰治自由邦。1899年英国人发动战争,布尔人战败,战争于1902年结束。

[22] 牛津郡在英格兰中南部。

[23] 月桂油香水主要用于剃须后润肤,用朗姆酒(或酒精和水及其他油)兑月桂叶提取出的油制成;拉塔其亚烟草为产于拉塔其亚(现位于叙利亚)的土耳其烟草。

[24] 指当时的英国军装。

[25] 英国在1534年以前尊奉天主教,受制于罗马教廷。1534年,为加强王权专制统治,亨利八世(1509-1547年在位)以罗马教皇不准其与王后西班牙公主卡瑟琳(原系亨利八世的寡嫂)离婚为由,在英国推行自上而下的宗教改革。在他的授意下,英国国会通过《至尊法案》,确立圣公会(亦称安立甘宗教会)为英国国教,但仍保留天主教会的主教制、重要教义及仪式;确立英王为英国国教会最高首脑,从而提高了王权对教会的权威,摆脱了罗马教廷的制约。英国民族教会始告确立。玛丽一世在位其间(1558-1603)极力反对宗教改革,残酷迫害英国国教的新教徒,强行恢复天主教,激起社会普遍不满。伊丽莎白一世(1558-1603年在位)即位后,于1559年重新确立圣公会为国教。(江苏教育出版社《西方典故》,李忠清主编)

[26] 细红线指的是克里米亚战争期间1854年10月25日巴拉克拉瓦战役中英军所采取的战术。当时英军着红色军装,排成两横排迎战俄国的哥萨克骑兵,如同两条细红线。后以此代指以少对多的坚毅态度。

[27] 炮弹和蛤(贝)壳都是一个词shell。

[28] 马非京,南非北部的一个镇,布尔战争中1899至1900年被布尔人围困217天,后解围。

[29] 克鲁格（1825-1904），南非政治家，曾任德兰士瓦省省长。

[30] 维琪，即维多利亚一世女王（1819-1901），1837-1901年在位期间加紧向外扩张，建立庞大的殖民地，工商业亦迅速发展，有史学家认为维多利亚女王时代是英国历史上的黄金时代。

[31] 威廉·格拉斯顿（1809-1898），1868年至1894年间担任过四届英国首相。

[32] 白人的责任，即所谓白人应将其文明带给落后民族的责任，出自英国作家吉卜林1899年的一首诗作，称白人的殖民行为系基督徒的义务。

[33] 指反对大英帝国海外扩张领土政策，仅仅专注于英格兰的英格兰人。

[34] 在英国，文法学校指建立于16世纪前后的注重拉丁语的学校，这些学校后来成为教授语言、历史等的中学。英国的中学主要有3种：一般的公费中学，中等收费的文法学校和昂贵的公学。

[35] 托马斯·卡莱尔（1795-1881），苏格兰散文作家和历史学家；

赫伯特·斯宾塞（1820-1903），英国哲学家，社会学家。

[36] B.O.P.为“Boys's Own Paper”（男孩自己的杂志）的缩写，为1879年至1967年专为男孩子们出版的英国杂志，包含许多惊险刺激的冒险故事。

[37] 约克郡布丁，用牛奶、面粉、鸡蛋、烤牛肉滴油等调制烘焙而成，常与烤牛肉同食。

[38] 帕尔默医生案（1856年），威廉·帕尔默被控毒死一个朋友，也查明他之前曾毒死过几位家人，于1856年被判处绞刑；

曼宁夫人案（1849年），玛利亚·曼宁与丈夫合谋杀死了自己的情人，曼宁夫妻均被处以绞刑。

[39] 指1888年8至11月在伦敦东区杀死至少7名妓女而始终未查明身份的杀人犯。

[40] 1英担等于112磅。

[41] “威斯克斯”（Whiskers）是给威克西的外号，意为“胡子”。

[42] 里丁，英格兰南部城市，伯克郡首府。

[43] 一种贵族化的私立付费学校，实行寄宿制，常为大学的预科学校。

[44] 康克戏，一种儿童游戏，双方各用绳子系住一个七叶树果，轮流互击，以击破对方的七叶树果为止。

[45] 丁，一种小型淡水鱼类。体延长，稍侧扁，银灰色，常具黑色小斑。

[46] 利姆里克是爱尔兰的城市，最初使用此地的一种鱼钩，称为“利姆里克钩”，特点是弧线较大，较长（引自《钓客清话》，艾萨克·沃尔顿著，缪哲译，花城出版社2001年版）；木鱼槌为一种渔具，用以打死或打昏已上钩的鱼。

[47] 坚信礼，天主教或东正教等的一种宗教仪式，目的是使信徒成为教会正式成员。

[48] 威廉·华兹华斯（1770-1850），英国桂冠诗人。下面的露西·格雷是华兹华斯一首诗中的一个女孩，也是该诗的题目。

[49] 安妮女王（1665-1714），1702-1714年在位。

[50] 旋式诱饵，饵上附有桨叶状小金属片，在水中拉动时会旋转。

[51] 克朗，英国旧币制的五先令硬币。

[52] 此处提到的均为英国的城市（度假地）。

[53] 比目鱼为鲽形目鱼类的总称，包括、鲆、鲽等各科鱼类。

[54] 英国诗人、历史小说家沃尔特·司各特（1771-1832）创作的一部小说。

[55] 约翰·拉斯金（1819-1900），英国艺术家评论家，社会改革家。

[56] 塞缪尔·斯迈尔斯（1812-1904），苏格兰作家，另著有《性格》《节俭》等。

[57] 约翰·福克斯（1516-1587），英国圣公会牧师。

[58] 基尔·哈代（1856-1915），英国工人运动家，曾参加创建苏格兰工党、独立工党、英国工党。

[59] 威廉·海斯凯斯·利华（1851-1925），英国企业家，慈善家，跨国企业联合利华的创始人之一；

威廉·威特利（1831-1907），英国商人，成立了多家百货商店。

[60] 保罗·德·柯克（1794-1871），法国作家，其小说多迎合小市民趣味。

[61] 玛丽·克莱利为玛丽·麦琪（1854？—1924）的笔名，英国小说家，著有《两世罗曼史》《塞尔玛》等；

霍尔·凯恩（1853-1931），英国小说家，著有《基督徒》《永恒之城》等；

安东尼·霍普为安东尼·霍普·霍金斯（1863-1933）的笔名，英国作家、剧作家，著有

《森达的俘虏》《亨佐的鲁帕特》等。

[62] 《芝麻与百合》为约翰·拉斯金的作品；

勃朗宁指罗伯特·勃朗宁（1812-1889），英国诗人。

[63] 在东苏塞克斯郡，英格兰南部。

[64] 在英格兰东部。

[65] 索姆河，在法国北部，第一次世界大战中的1916年7月，在此进行了一场大战役，单是7月1日这一天，英军就死了6万人，创造了战争史上的新纪录。

[66] KCMG（Knight Commander of St.Michael & St.George）即圣迈克尔及圣乔治高级勋爵，英国贵族名衔的一种；DSO（Distinguished Service Order）为杰出服务勋位。

[67] 德·雷什克（1850-1925），波兰男高音歌唱家。

[68] 马塞尔·普鲁斯特（1871-1922），法国作家，代表作为七卷本小说《追忆似水年华》；

亨利·詹姆斯（1843-1916），美国小说家，晚年加入英国籍，著有《一位女士的画像》《鸽翼》等。

[69] 赫伯特·乔治·威尔斯（1866-1946），英国作家，著有《隐身人》《时间机器》等。

[70] 康普顿·麦肯齐（1883-1972），英国作家，《留声机》杂志的创办人，著有《狂欢节》《邪恶街》等。

[71] 约瑟夫·康拉德（1857-1924），波兰裔英国小说家，著有《水仙号上的黑家伙》《黑暗之心》等。

[72] 鲁德亚德·吉卜林（1865-1936），英国小说家、诗人，著有《丛林故事》《吉姆》等，获1907年诺贝尔文学奖；

约翰·高尔斯华绥（1867-1933），英国小说家、剧作家，获1932年诺贝尔文学奖，著有《福尔赛世家》三部曲等；

巴里·培恩（1864-1928），英国小说家，著有《爱莉莎》《前面一个》等；

W.W.杰克布斯（1863-1943），英国小说家，著有《货物种种》、《猴爪》等；

派特·瑞基（1860-1930），英国小说家，著有《国家之子》《犯法者》等；

奥利佛·奥尼恩斯（1873-1961），英国小说家，著有《公开的秘密》《天国的怨恨》等；

亨利·塞顿·麦里曼（1862-1903），英国小说家，著有《天鹅绒手套》《灰色女士》等；

莫里斯·巴林（1874-1945），英国记者、小说家，著有《达芙妮·阿黛恩》《丁克的离去》等；

斯蒂芬·麦肯那（1888-1967），英国小说家，作品不详；

梅·辛克莱（1863-1946），英国诗人，小说家，著有《撤退的战地救护车》《三姐妹》等。

阿诺德·贝尼特（1867-1931），著有《五镇的安娜》《老妇人的故事》等；

爱里娜·格利（1864-1943），英国小说家、剧作家，著有《拜访伊丽莎白》《三星期》等；

欧·亨利（1862-1910），美国短篇小说家，著有《麦琪的礼物》《警察与赞美诗》等；

斯蒂芬·里柯克（1869-1944），加拿大作家、政治经济学家，著有《文学的谬误》《小镇艳阳录》等；

西拉斯·霍京（1850-1935），英国作家，著有《上帝的弃儿》《鲁本的儿子》等；

吉恩·斯特拉顿·波特（1863-1924），美国小说家，著有《雀斑》《彩虹之脚》等。

[73] 乔治·摩尔（1852-1933），爱尔兰作家，著有《埃斯特·沃特斯》《欢呼与告别》等。

[74] 易卜生（1828-1906），挪威剧作家、诗人，著有《玩偶之家》《人民公敌》等。

[75] 托基原为英格兰西南部的一个自治镇，后并入托比镇，为著名旅游胜地。

[76] 劳合·乔治（1863-1945），1916-1922年任英国首相。

[77] 伦敦的一条街，以报馆集中而著名。

[78] 伊灵区，伦敦西部的一个区。

[79] 优势分，指终局前双方打成平手后一方赢得的第一分。

[80] 低教会派，指英国基督教圣公会中的一派，主张简化仪式，反对过分强调教会

的权威地位，较倾向于清教徒。

[81] 特里其雪茄，一种两端开口的印度雪茄烟；兴都斯坦语，印度北部使用的一种语言；浦那，印度西部城市。

[82] 婆罗洲，东南亚加里曼丹岛的旧称；沙捞越州，马来西亚州名，在东马来西亚。

[83] 锡兰，斯里兰卡旧称。

[84] 指结婚。

[85] 神智学，泛指任何神秘主义哲学和神学说教。

[86] 佩尔曼教育研究院，该研究院以发明了佩尔曼记忆训练法而著名。

[87] 干草暖箱，一种填有干草的箱子，食物煮沸后置于其中得以焖熟。

[88] 灵的外质，据说是灵媒在降神过程的恍惚状态发出的一种黏性体外物质。

[89] 左派读书会中的“左派”（left）一词也是“留下”（leave）一词的过去分词形式，故有此误解。

[90] 美拉尼西亚群岛在南太平洋，主要包括新喀里多尼亚岛、斐济群岛和所罗门群岛等。

[91] 1936年10月25日，意大利、德国在柏林签订协定，称“柏林—罗马轴心”，同年11月25日，德、日在柏林签订《反共产国际协定》，三国同盟正式成立，在二战中被称为“轴心国”；

人民阵线指左派与中间派政党为反对法西斯等共同敌人而建立的阵线，通常为临时性。

[92] 指拥护托洛茨基政治主张的人。托洛茨基（1879-1940），苏联托洛茨基集团领袖，十月革命后历任外交人民委员、革命军事委员会主席等职，后被开除出党，驱逐出苏联，继而组织“第四国际”，最终被苏联在墨西哥暗杀。

[93] 公元410年，哥特人阿拉里克率兵攻入罗马，对其进行了三天三夜的洗劫。

[94] 指收音机。

[95] 伯利克里（公元前495—前429），古雅典政治家、民主派领导人（公元前460—前429），后成为雅典国家的实际统治者，其统治时期成为雅典文化和军事上的全盛时期。

[96] 英格兰历史上有两位玛丽女王，玛丽一世（1518-1558）及玛丽二世

(1662-1694)，此处具体所指不详；

腓尼基，地中海沿岸的古国，约当今黎巴嫩和叙利亚沿海一带。

[97] 阿思脱雷思，古代腓尼基及叙利亚主管爱情和生殖的女神。

[98] 克里特岛，在希腊，是爱琴文明的发源地；迈锡尼，希腊古城。

[99] 日俄战争（1904-1905），发生在中国东北的日本与沙俄之间的战争。

[100] 诺丁汉，英格兰中部城市；德比，英格兰中部城市；布里斯托尔，英格兰西南部港市。

[101] “低俗钓鱼”为起源于18世纪英国的一个词，所钓对象为鲑鱼、鳟鱼、鲑鱼以外的其他淡水鱼。

[102] 苏格兰场指伦敦警察厅；

比弗布鲁克勋爵（1879-1964），英国报业巨头，两次世界大战时期均为英国内阁成员，是保守党决策人之一。

[103] 锡利哈姆为威尔士德韦达郡一地名，以培养良种犬著名。

[104] 飞燕草，一种长得高的园艺植物，开蓝、白或粉红色花。

[105] 兰开郡，在英格兰西北部。

[106] 圣乔治（？-302？），英格兰的主保圣人，基督教殉难者，传说曾杀恶龙救一少女。

[107] 一种带有墨绿霉纹的白色多脂膏状干酪。

[108] 英国1882年征服埃及过程中的一场关键战役，发生于1882年9月13日。

[109] 铅与锡的合金。

[110] S有一种书写体与F很相似。

[111] 撒克逊人原住在德国西北部，其中部分人于5至6世纪征服并定居于英国。

[112] 纽伯瑞在英格兰中南部，1643年至1644年在此进行过内战。

[113] 马吉特，在英格兰东南部，是海滨旅游胜地。

[114] 约等于94公斤。

[115] 在英格兰中部。

[116] 原为大伦敦的一个区。

[117] 在伦敦市。

[118] 指英格兰都铎王朝（1485-1603）时代的风格。

[119] 伊丽莎白一世（1533-1603），在位期间为1558-1603年。

[120] 在大伦敦。

[121] 此处提到的人名是英国常见人名，类似说张三李四。

[122] 考文垂在英格兰中部，贝特福德在英格兰东南部。